

CUP OF SILENCE



ARTHUR J. REES

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ISLAND OF DESTINY

MOON ROCK

THE HAND IN THE DARK

THE SHRIEKING PIT

CUP OF SILENCE

BY
ARTHUR J. REES



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PREFACE

SINCE this story appeared in serial form recently in the *Westminster Gazette* the hand of man has already wrought its changes upon a part of those downs which are the scene of Ailsa's wanderings in Chapters XXX and XXXII. Perhaps the day is not far distant when the changeful conditions of modern England will finally invade and destroy the inviolateness of the downs around Cissbury and Chantonbury, which as yet remain the "cup of silence" of the story and the dream country of the book.

A. J. R.

1924.

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BOOK I

SEED

CUP OF SILENCE

CHAPTER I

LONDON

I

As the train slackened speed by its allotted platform at Paddington, a young man in a dark blue suit of naval cut sprang lightly from a third-class carriage and made for the exit. He did not need a porter, but carried a small leather suit-case in his hand.

Emerging from the station, he looked about him with a lingering glance which took in everything. London lay outspread around him—the London of Charles Dickens, whom he had read on distant seas—but London under a cloud, enfolded in white mist, clammy and thick, through which warm drops of rain fell on the visitor's hands from an invisible sky, weeping over this April day. But the weather had no effect on his feelings. He stood there for a few minutes, then his eye sought the courtyard, edged with vehicles, and he made a sign to a disengaged taxi-cab to come forward. When the driver did so the young man gave the address of an hotel in the Strand as he stepped into the vehicle, and was driven off.

As the drive proceeded he looked from the window with the same wistful air of attention and wonder. There was not much to see, but the little interested him intensely. The long journey from Cornwall had brought him from the sea into another world. London seemed to flow about him with the murmurous sweep of a mightier ocean, dimly glimpsed through the mist: an unknown sea of which the sailor within him knew nothing.

There was a block in Oxford Circus, and traffic held stationary by a policeman, signaling with outstretched hand. The young man could see things here at closer range—the long line of omnibuses and motor-cars, the shops, the treadmill of humanity on the pavements, and the faces of the pretty English girls. No longer an ocean—but London, great and inexhaustible, the city of civilization and the world. It was quite unlike the place of his vision, but something greater and grander still.

The block thinned at last, and they moved on again. At the bottom of Oxford Street the driver turned to the right by the picturesque bookstalls of Charing Cross Road, and so on by way of Long Acre and Bedford Street. Thus he brought his fare into the heart of the Strand, where presently he pulled up before the shining entrance of a large hotel.

From the entrance a commissionaire issued, composed and large, to open the taxi-cab's door. The young man dismounted, and held out his fare to the driver, accompanying it with a tip sufficient to extract a muttered acknowledgment and smile. The vehicle drove off, and the young man entered the hotel.

He mounted the broad marble steps quickly, but paused just inside the swing-doors, looking around him at the hall, the restaurant, and the thronged lounge like one in the presence of a not unfamiliar scene. Then with a faint sigh he turned into the office for the purpose of booking a room.

One of the girls came forward to attend to him. She heard his request with a detached and business-like air, but her feminine eye noted his good looks.

"Have you engaged a room?" she asked.

It appeared he had neglected that precaution. He said so in a clear pleasant voice, accompanied by a regretful smile. The girl, who had bobbed hair, and a soft English skin, gave him the ghost of a smile in return. Then she considered.

"As it happens, I can give you a room on the sixth floor," she said. "Will you please register here?"

He accepted the pen she proffered, and turned to the large open book, chained to the counter like a mediæval Bible. With a clear hand he wrote the name "Harry Vivian" in the first column, and in the next, dedicated to addresses, he added the words "s.s. *Avenel*, Falmouth Bay." Under the next heading, "Nationality," he hesitated slightly, then put down "British." When the entry was finished the girl gave him a key, with a brass label attached. He thanked her, and dropped it in his pocket. A porter came forward and took his suit-case, and the girl's head was once more bent over her desk.

Harry Vivian went into the deep and pillared lounge. It was warm and cheerful there, in contrast to the chill discomfort of the weather outside. A waiter hastened to take his order, and he asked for a cup of coffee. When it came he lingered over it, glancing about him.

II

He sat there, scanning the animated scene with interest. The large mirrors, the bright clusters of growing flowers, the people drinking coffee or wine in deep tapestried chairs among tall palms—how familiar it seemed, and how it all came back to him across the years!

At that moment he felt like one sitting in a theater watching a play seen before, only the stage was the background of his brain, and the scenes were enacted by memory in the setting on which his eyes looked.

The first scene was the arrival of a pretty, haggard woman and a little boy at the hotel twelve years before—his mother and himself. They had reached England by devious and weariful ways from the South of France, crossing the Channel in a storm, and driving through London streets on just such a night as this. The little boy had never been in England before, and his first impression of London was of vast streets filled with more people than he had supposed to exist, where darkness and gloom replaced the blue sea and white sands of the country

they had just left. The hotel was equally terrifying in its vastness; a place which was a world in itself, a world in which they knew nobody. To the imagination of childhood it was a dismal change from their previous life of happiness and sunshine by the Mediterranean shore.

Followed a week of utter loneliness in this great place of numerous floors and rooms, where seemingly people might live for years and speak to nobody but servants, then go away or die without being missed. Though a solitary life was not new to the two. Since the death of his father, four years before this visit to London, they had been quite alone in the world. But there are degrees of loneliness. In France they had felt at home, and they had a few friends. But the isolation of London was something quite new to the boy. It had overawed him, and made him afraid. Even the waiters neglected them. Perhaps his mother tipped them inadequately, as women usually do. They went nowhere, and no one called to see them. Night after night they would sit in the restaurant, listening to the music until the crowded room began to thin, and when the last number was played his mother would rise from table (a little unsteadily, he remembered, alas!) and, holding his hand with hot moist fingers, take him upstairs to bed. Safe in her room, she would sit for hours deep in thought, and he would watch her through the intervening open door of his small room, unable to sleep. At times when he did sleep she would come into his room and bend over his pillow, her long hair drooping on his face. And when she had brought him to wakefulness again she would take him in her arms and say, "I am very lonely, Harry, and very unhappy. This is very cruel." And he would wonder why.

His next memory was of his mother's illness. From his room he had heard her call, and he had slipped from his bed to run to her. She was lying across the bed beneath the light, breathing quickly, her hands twitching restlessly on the eider-down quilt. The look she gave him was dark and wide with fear. "Harry, dear, I am ill—

call someone." That was all she could say. He ran into the corridor, and called the maid on night duty there. The girl hurried for the housekeeper and the residential doctor, who had his room on that floor. He remembered so well the doctor entering the room and bending over his mother, and how the colored electric bulb overhead had thrown a shaft of light on their two faces—one dark and keen, the other pallid and ill. Watching unnoticed and forgotten, he had seen the vague negative gesture of the doctor's head in reply to the housekeeper's inquiring glance, and, boy though he was, he had understood. His mother was very ill . . . pneumonia, as he afterwards learnt.

The doctor had her removed in an ambulance to a nursing home, and he had stayed on at the hotel, in the housekeeper's care. It was the housekeeper who took him to see his mother three days after, just before she died. They had left him alone with her. That moment was a vision he had carried about with him for years, and it was before him now. A plainly furnished room overlooking the river, and his mother lying there, never moving, white and still. Then she had opened her eyes, and, somehow, he understood by her look that she wanted him to come close beside her. And, with infinite difficulty, she had whispered a few words in his ear.

The faint echo of them came back to him at that moment. . . . "Harry, go to Hilmerceux, Sussex. Tell them . . . tell. . . ."

That was all. She said no more, but just lay there clasping his hand. Presently the doctor and the nurse returned to the room. They whispered to each other for a moment, and the doctor took him away.

His final vision of that earlier time was a bare cemetery on a bleak day, with wind wailing through the trees and rain falling into an open grave. He stood by the graveside, holding the doctor's hand, and the droning voice of the clergyman, broken by the wind, came to his wondering ears like the murmur of some faint and faraway tale.

Alone? He had wondered since if any woman had ever lived and died so completely alone as his mother. And she had left the desolate heritage of her solitude to him—left him alone in the world without a friend.

Sitting there now, these things seemed of recent happening, so vivid were the memories that thronged. The scene was unaltered. Nothing was changed. Nothing.

Even the people appeared to be the same. Had the fat man at the next table actually been sipping syrupy crimson liquor from that tiny green glass for twelve long years? It was all too incredibly real. . . .

The only difference was in himself. He had gone away, grown to manhood, and sailed the seas, but at that moment it seemed as though these events had not been. Vaguely and obscurely he was aware of the gap of time, but in spite of it he felt just then like the friendless boy who had returned to the hotel from the cemetery at Kensal Green that bitter winter night twelve years ago.

III

Left alone, his one desire had been to get back to France. He had not known the object of their visit to England, nor had he understood the meaning of his mother's last words. Neither the one nor the other had ever been made clear. He wondered, now he was back in England, if they ever would.

But at that time, twelve years before, his passionate longing was to find his way again to Saint-Just, the little mountain village above the shores of the Mediterranean, where he had been brought up, and where his father had died. And the idea haunted him that the river near the hotel, where his mother had once or twice taken him for a walk, brought the dream within reach. He had seen ships going up and down it, and once there was one with a French name. . . .

He had turned over the idea deeply and seriously—very secretly too—as a child's mind will. From some-

thing unattainable and remote it became quite simple and clear, needing only resolution to be grasped. He did not know what would become of him if he stayed at the hotel, but he did not want to stay. Its vastness depressed him, and he saw something lurkily hostile in its blank indifference to his presence there. Thinking thus, the quality of self-reliance was born within him, and he set about the achievement of his dream.

His departure was easy of accomplishment, though he had not seen it in that light at the time. In flurried secrecy he had made his preparations, packing his scanty belongings in the small bag which had brought them to England. His mother's luggage had been taken and stored away, but the balance of the money in her handbag, after paying the burial expenses, had been handed to him by the housekeeper—nearly three pounds in English money; more than enough to take him back, he thought. She had given it to him on the day of the funeral, after asking him many questions about his mother's past life. He had answered her reluctantly, through shyness, and a dread of why she wanted to know. How he recalled the perturbed expression of her face when she gathered from him that his mother had no relatives, and no friends in England.

So, with his small bag in his hand and his money safely wrapped up, he stole away, glancing up the long passages as he passed cautiously down the stairs, fearing the appearance of some unexpected person, who might order him to stay.

With his wider knowledge of the world he smiled a little now at the memory of that fear. Nobody took any notice of him as he hurried across the great hall. Slipping down the marble steps, he found himself in the street, and free to go.

His thought was to seek the sluggish yellow river where the steamers were, and follow the water until he reached a wharf. He had heard of the London docks, and he meant to inquire his way there. And when he reached the

place of ships he intended to go aboard one bound for France, and ask to be taken back as a passenger, paying his way.

Such was his childish fancy as he hastened through the London streets on that distant wet afternoon. It was strange to look back on it all now, with the knowledge that this youthful escapade, so lightly begun, had led him farther afield than France, to distant lands by far-away seas.

A desire came into his reverie. He looked up at the clock. The hands pointed to half-past five.

"I wonder if I could find my way to that spot again?" he murmured to himself.

Rising to his feet he left the lounge.

IV

Outside, people were hurrying homeward or just beginning to come out, jostling in increasing density as they made for the omnibuses and tubes. Harry picked his way across the Strand, and turned down one of the short, steep streets which branched off to the Embankment. Half-way down he paused as if looking for landmarks, and then crossed over to a twisted lane which forked crookedly off by some old buildings on the left.

The way was farther than he thought—a good hour's walk at least—but he followed it through dimly remembered turnings and twistings with a tenacity of memory which was rarely at fault. It led him through a maze of small streets and tumble-down houses, topped by tall buildings here and there, but never very far from the riverside.

There was a damp, musty smell in the air, and he heard the faint sound of sirens. It began to grow dark, but he kept on. He turned up yet another crooked thoroughfare, and quite unexpectedly came to his goal. It was in the neighborhood of the river that he reached it. The street opened on an old deserted wharf at the end.

A wave of irresistible emotion swept over him as he stood before the entrance of the high dark building, where the long wooden staircase tunnelled steeply down to the door. It was there he had stood by the doorway, twelve years before, reading the office plate of the small Mediterranean shipping company which had offices up on the fourth floor. He remembered starting upstairs, when the man who was to be his best friend appeared, coming down. The great burly figure had continued on his way out, and in passing had looked at him with shrewd kind eyes. Instantly he guessed—he knew not how—that the kind eyes were a seaman's, and French, and he ran after their owner to ask him (rather piteously) if he knew where a French ship was to be found. (*"Pardon, monsieur, où trouverai-je, s'il vous plaît, un vaisseau français?"*) Then, by an afterthought which proved a happy inspiration, he added—*"un vaisseau à retourner à Saint-Just."* At these words the burly figure swung round in a trice. As he said afterwards, the name took him back to the days of his childhood. He looked down on his interrogator with astonishment on his bearded face. *Eh, bien!* And what did the little boy want with Saint-Just—"the wart on the mountain's nose," as he called it, in his harsh provincial French. (*"Saint-Just, ce petit village tout comme une verrue au nez de la montagne—qu'en savez-vous?"*) The little boy replied he had been brought up there, and it was his home. The next question—not unnaturally—was what *le pauvre garçon* was doing in London alone, carrying his bag about the streets. And, encouraged by the kind eyes, "*le pauvre garçon*" had faltered out his story.

The other, towering above his head, had listened with grave attention to every word. When the narration was finished he had shrugged his shoulders and stroked his beard consideringly. *Parbleu!* It was a difficult case, he murmured through bearded lips, and his gaze wandered away to the rotten wharf. Then it returned to the boy on the pavement in front of him. He appeared to be considering the difficult case—pondering over it with grave,

wise shakes of the head—and the boy waited until he chose to speak. When he did open his mouth again it was to say that he was the captain of a steamer lying in the river some miles away; *un vaisseau marchand*, which was not returning to the Mediterranean and Saint-Just, but outward bound for China seas and Hong Kong. *Voilà!* A cabin boy was needed. Would the little boy whose parents were dead, like to go round the world as a cabin boy instead of returning to Saint-Just? (“*Au lieu de retourner à Saint-Just, pourquoi ne pas faire le tour du monde avec moi en qualité de mousse sur mon vaisseau—Le Vanneau?*”) He told the boy he would have plenty to do, but that if he was a good lad and served the ship well, he would, if *le bon Dieu* saw fit, make a seaman of him in time.

And the promise had been well kept.

CHAPTER II

A JOURNEY

I

Sight-seeing occupied his days, but in the hour before dinner he liked best to sit by the window of his room, looking out through the dusk over the river and the Strand. There was so much to be seen from the altitude of the sixth floor, and the sight of such myriads of people was a refreshing change after the solitude of the sea. And now his final evening in London had come. His stay there had lasted nearly a week, and he wanted to go to Sussex before he returned to his ship. He was to go there the next day. His only regret was that he hadn't time to visit Saint-Just as well.

Saint-Just! He had often thought of the little town of twisted streets, walled in by rocks, on a mountain height reached by a pass. It was not easy to forget Saint-Just, in the solitude of the hills; its square and fountain, the white houses with green sunblinds, the steep streets with worn gray stones which climbed to the overhanging ledge thrust dizzily out above the sapphire gleam of the Mediterranean, a thousand feet below. These things, and the simple folk of the place, remained as lifelong images in his heart. He endowed the home of his childhood with a glamour which, like enough, it had never possessed, but principally he remembered it because of his father.

With the memory of childhood he recalled him now. Dark and silent, and profoundly reserved, the father had left on his son's mind the impression of a remote and superior being, dwelling apart in a kind of detached contempt for the little town and its provincial ways. He was a man of few words, with little to say to the foreign

volubility around him—a man of taciturn habit even in his own house. But the words he had uttered to his son had been effectually to the point, as far as retention of memory was concerned. “Never forget you are English, my boy.” Such was the burden of his teaching, repeated again and again, as though it was more important than anything else he had to say, and the child, though a little afraid of him, had never forgotten.

His mother was of different type. As a child he had not understood her at all; he was far too young to gather the significance of what he saw. He thought of her now as a woman with over-bright eyes and a fair, doll-like prettiness which remained her dower until the last. But he had known, young as he was then, that things were wrong between her and his father. As he recalled his father’s aloofness now, he understood, in part, his mother’s fault. It was an ugly one in a woman: she drank. Secretly at first, but more openly when the death of his father relieved her of the necessity of pretence. To her wrongdoing was added a strange temper, violent and sullen in turns. Finally—the son guessed it now—she had been in some way beneath his father in birth.

His parents had never told him why they lived in France, out of their own country, subsisting on remittances which (as he knew) arrived once a quarter in an envelope bearing an English stamp. A hazardous existence it appeared to have been, but his father had never worried about money, and he had nothing to do. The years had passed over his head as he stayed on in this remote foreign town, with no occupation but idleness, a stranger to the active concerns of men. After his father died the quarterly legal envelope continued to arrive. His mother had received it up to the time of her death. It reached her at different addresses, when she had moved on her way—after she left Saint-Just. He had often wondered who sent the remittances, and what became of them after his mother died. Perhaps he would discover that, too, if he succeeded in finding Hilmerceux.

His mother had not told him the reason for the visit to England, though once or twice after his father's death she had hinted that she might take him on a trip to that country soon. The promise had been vague, but she had carried it out at length, clothing the expedition with the air of a hazardous enterprise, which he had never understood.

He did not understand it any better after the lapse of years, but now that he was in England again, with time on his hands, he intended to try and find out. If there was anything to be discovered about his parents or their people, he felt that the time had come for him to know. Not that he cared very much, because after all, he was young, and had to make his own way in the world. And, indeed, he was not a landsman, but one who belonged to the sea.

He passed in review the years which had made a sailor of him under the guidance of the man who had taken him away. That meeting by the riverside had been a great stroke of luck for a friendless boy. What a friend he had found in Captain Andrée, now sleeping in the little cemetery at Yuala Lumpur. At first life afloat had been an existence compounded of hardships, with unhappiness and loneliness thrown in, but he had soon found his feet, taken hard knocks without whimpering, and learnt the inexorable rule of the sea. And Captain Andrée although a rough taskmaster, had always stood his friend.

Andrée belonged to the old square-rigged sailing days, to the period of tall masts and spreading spars and he brought his old-fashioned seamanship aboard steam—which he never liked; no, not to his dying day. And, if he had driven him hard and shown him the rough side of the sea, he had made a sailor of him, as he had promised to do on that distant day twelve years before. Through him he had learnt all he knew, and ultimately worked his way aft. Now, at the end of twelve years, he was comfortably entrenched in his profession, second officer of the steamship *Avenel*, commanded by Captain McQuade,

and at present unloading a light general cargo at Fal-mouth Bay.

During those years he had been too busy to think much about the past. There is no time for dreaming at sea, and in the quick succession of changing scenes and fresh vistas the memories of his childhood had partly faded from sight. It remained in the background of his mind, like a vaguely remembered scene, and at times a wave of recollection would bring it sharply back across the gulf of time.

As he grew older, he cherished a hope of going again to England some day. He never contemplated a similar journey to France, nor did he ever think of that country in the same intimate way, and this struck him as strange, though, perhaps, it was not so strange.

For his father had impressed the knowledge of his blood on him as a boy, and as he became older his Englishry grew, especially when at length he found himself aboard English ships, earning his living beneath the British flag. Then France became a faint memory indeed, and England beckoned to him with a gesture gracious and real. And he looked forward to the time when it would be possible for him to go.

At last he was in England, only to find himself isolated there. As a sailor he had made friends abroad, in different parts of the world, but here he knew no one at all. Loneliness did not matter at sea. One was not conscious of it there. But it was a different sensation to be a solitary unit in London, with the knowledge that not a living face among those myriads would brighten at the sight of him, not one being would say, "Why, it's Harry Vivian. I'm glad to see you. Where have you been?"

There was nobody in the hotel who remembered him in the past, as he had vaguely hoped when he went to the office to inquire, with the wish to thank those who had been kind to him in those far-off days. The housekeeper had married and sailed to Canada, the doctor had gone elsewhere, and the manager was dead. After all, it was

a very long time ago, and human life in big cities is an unstable thing. However, the period of his leave had almost slipped away, and the undertaking of this shadowy journey to Sussex would see it expired quite.

As he reflected before, it was almost a matter of indifference to him, but if he really had relatives in England he would like to know who they were. He had always promised himself that when he was able to leave the Eastern trade for a berth aboard a home-going ship he would be able to carry out his mother's last injunction, and make an attempt to discover the meaning of her unfinished words. That duty remained to be performed before he left England once more. It was a curious chance that he should have discovered abroad the whereabouts of a place called Hilmerceux, not so very long ago.

II

The scene was recorded in his mind by the circumstances, which had formed a pleasant interlude at the time. It was less than a year ago, when he had made his first trip as second mate aboard the *Silenus*, a British steamer trading in southern seas. She was of the type which carries a few passengers occasionally, and there were two aboard this trip, a young Englishman named Allingham and his sister, travelling around the globe for the sake of the brother's health. During the voyage they had become very friendly with the second mate of the *Silenus*, who had done what he could to make their sojourn on a cargo boat as enjoyable as possible.

Rose Allingham was a tall, graceful girl, with fair hair, and a glow of color beneath her skin which suggested an English rose. Harry frequented the company of brother and sister when off duty, and she talked to him in a sympathetic, understanding way. She stood by his side when they entered Hauraki Gulf, enraptured by the beauty of its violent distances, and he had pointed out the lofty heights by name as they steamed in. Before the steamer left the

port they spent a day ashore together in Auckland, lunching in a Queen Street restaurant, and ascending Mount Eden afterwards.

On the grassy summit of the extinct volcano which looks down on two seas they had sat and talked, and their conversation had taken an intimate turn.

It was Rose Allingham who had done most of the talking, telling him of her English home and people and the pretty county of Sussex where they lived; while her brother sat silent beside her, thin and sunburnt, his eyes fixed upon the softly glittering sea far beneath. But Robert Allingham never had very much to say. Harry, on his part, had listened intently, and had promised to go and see them when he went to England. But he knew they had not yet returned home.

Rose Allingham had asked him about his own people, and where did they live? He was a little embarrassed by her look of sympathy when he told her, laughingly, that he had no relatives, but was just a solitary rolling stone who went about the wide waters of the globe in ships. To evade questions he talked on, letting her know that, although his parents were English, he had been brought up in France.

She was surprised at this piece of information, because, as she hesitatingly remarked, he appeared so thoroughly English.

He had said no more about himself, disliking the idea of abandoning the reserve with which he had always faced the mysterious life of his parents abroad. It was plain that she was puzzled over the strangeness of his case. In her eyes he had taken the vague shape of a young Englishman who knew nothing—practically nothing—of his native land. Apparently she seemed to see something unnatural about such a state of affairs, as if it were a sort of defect in him. She insisted that it was his duty to visit England without delay. Turning to him as he lay indolently by her side on the concave slope of the grass-covered crater, she said:

"I hope you will go soon and see your own country."

"I am looking forward to doing so," he said, "that is, when I am able to join a ship going home."

She looked at him intently, puzzling over him.

"I wonder if your parents have any relatives there, of whom you may know nothing?" she said.

That was a question he could not answer, so he remained silent. She pointed downward to the sweeping panorama of green and blue, and the town of Auckland nestling on its hills.

"This is very beautiful," she said, "but it is so new. . . . There is no tradition behind it. Every inch of English soil is steeped in the tradition of the past—the tradition of ages—if you understand what I mean."

"That may be so, though it made no appeal to me when I was there," he rejoined. "Of course I was very young at the time, and I was only in England for a week. I like this."

He threw a hand out towards the blue of the sea below, where islands glittered like a handful of emeralds scattered on a moving silken sheen, and Cape Colville in the north was veiled in shimmering haze. "This is very beautiful—do you not think so?"

"Yes, it is," she assented, but her eyes were on him, and not on the violet shadows and clustering islands of the great sweeping gulf. "You only saw London," she went on. "You know nothing of the English countryside, which is quite a different thing. It is very wonderful. The country of England is the sweetest thing in the world—at least, it is to me—Devon, Kent, and the South Downs. And there is very beautiful scenery in England; especially in Sussex, where I live."

"Sussex?" he said thoughtfully. "Do you happen to know a place called Hilmerceux, in Sussex?"

"Hilmerceux?" She repeated the name lingeringly, as if it carried a familiar echo, though she could not tell from where.

Her brother broke in:

"Surely you have not forgotten Hilmerceux, Rose—the big house which stands alone on the downs, not far from Lorington?"

She smiled.

"Oh, yes, I remember now—how stupid of me not to remember!" She turned to Harry. "It's a well-known house in Sussex," she told him, "the residence of Lady Hilmerceux. I don't know anything about it, though—it's in quite a different part of the county to where we live."

He was surprised to learn that Hilmerceux was a house, and he wondered if it were there that his mother had wished him to go. Somehow he had always thought the name "Hilmerceux" meant an English village or town. It hardly seemed likely to him that this could be the place, for his mother had never mentioned the name of Lady Hilmerceux to him. And yet she had said "Hilmerceux, Sussex." That was clear enough. Rose Allingham broke into his thought, speaking again:

"Hilmerceux belongs to one of the old county families—one of the ruling caste."

He looked surprised.

"I thought the tradition of caste was passing away in England, since the war."

"The English newspapers think so, but I am not so sure. Really, I do not think caste will ever die out or pass away in England. The people of the English countryside are still almost feudal in spirit, in spite of what newspapers and politicians say. You must live among them for a while to understand that. Nobility—the old nobility—is in their eyes something finer and better there than ordinary flesh. A kind of divine right—the heritage of blood—clings to it still."

"I do not understand anything of this," he said, with a smile.

"But you will when you go to England," she rejoined. "Somehow caste suits England. When it finally passes away, England—the traditional England—will have ceased to exist. There is something very sweet and gracious about

the system, properly understood. Perhaps it is because the old ruling classes of England have always done their duty so well."

"I must look forward to seeing it all for myself some day." He went on tentatively: "Would you mind writing down the address of that old house in Sussex, Miss Allingham, and how to get there?"

"The address of Hilmerceux? Certainly," she replied. "Have you a pencil? Then I can write it on the back of this card."

"If you wouldn't mind writing it in this pocket-book instead," he said. "Cards get lost."

As he handed it to her a small oval photograph in a silver frame fell out. She glanced at it instinctively, but without comment, as it lay face upward on the grass, but he could see interrogation in her eyes. He picked it up and held it out to her.

"This belonged to my best friend—an old French sea captain—who died last year," he explained.

"What a quaint tarnished little frame!" she said. "Is it a picture of your French captain's wife?"

He shook his head.

"There's rather a strange story attached to it," he said. "Captain Andrée picked it up on a rock off the English coast many years ago. His ship observed a mysterious flash coming from a hole high up in the rock. He went in a boat and climbed up to see what it was. There was nothing there—merely this little frame lying on a ledge. It seems that the sun's rays, penetrating into the hole, were refracted by the glass of the frame like a mirror, and caused the flashes which had been seen by the ship. Captain Andrée put the little picture in his pocket, and treasured it as a curious memento of the sea. I have often heard him tell the story."

"How interesting!" murmured Rose Allingham. "I wonder how it got there?" She bent over the frame. "What a pretty girl, and what lovely hair! See, Robert——"

She passed it to her brother, who looked at it in silence and then handed it back to Harry. Rose Allingham watched him as he restored it carefully to the pocket-book.

"You seem to value it greatly."

She spoke in a soft voice. He looked at her gravely.

"I do," he said quietly. "You see, it is my only keepsake of Captain Andrée. He looked after me when I was a boy, and I shall never forget him."

Robert Allingham rose to his feet, looking seaward at the light fading on harbor and gulf.

"Don't you think we ought to be going down?" he said. "It's getting late."

Harry glanced at his watch.

"Yes, he said. "It will take us two hours—or thereabout—to get back to the steamer."

.

The sky outside the hotel had gone coldly dark as he sat in his room, with the memory of this blue and golden afternoon stirring in his brain. He rose from his chair and stood by the window, looking out on the Strand, his thoughts still dwelling absently on that episode of the past, mingled with ideas of the future. His hand felt for his pocket-book, where the address of Hilmerceux reposed, beside the little picture in its tarnished frame, just as Rose Allingham had written it down on a blank leaf, that afternoon at Mount Eden nearly twelve months ago.

Was it worth while going so far on this vague quest? He doubted it. But at least he could make the attempt and then the thing would be off his mind.

With this intention he left the room, and proceeded downstairs, to make inquiries at the office about trains for Sussex on the following day.

CHAPTER III

BY CISSA'S RING

I

Ailsa did not care for the weekly shopping visit to the seaside town, and was glad when the time came to go home. She loved the long ride in winter, after the London visitors had gone, and the great country omnibus was filled with Sussex folk, all laden with bundles too. She would hurry along the front to where the bus waited, slip into her seat, and wait for the beat of the engine which announced the impending start. This was always exciting. There was a rush of packages and milkcans to be stowed away, and late arrivals hastening with flushed visages along the street. Ailsa would watch these happenings with bright and interested eyes. At the last moment—and never before—the driver would emerge from the office opposite, smoking a great pipe. He crossed the road leisurely, exchanged a word with the loiterers on the pavement, then sprang into his seat, and away they would go. There was a comforting sense of finality in that abrupt departure—like starting on a sea voyage. And in a few minutes they were clear of the town.

The way swept upward from the sea to the high seat of the South Downs, but the beginning of the downs were not in sight until the railway bridge was crossed and the last red bungalows left behind. The bungalows were a recent growth, and threatened to spread, but as yet the downs untouched beyond that point to the soaring ramparts of Cissbury, Black Patch, and Chanctonbury, guarding the inviolate sumptuousness of their great green cup. Modern brickwork gave way to ancient stone, tidy pavements merged into rutted paths, and then the road

(after one turn) pierced like an arrow into the heart of the downs. Debouching through a small hamlet with a roadside church, it climbed steadily four miles or more, skirted the meeting place of the three great hills seated in solitude above the waters of the Channel, then dipped gently over the lip of the cup for some miles before rising again on the farther side.

That night Ailsa found the homeward ride less pleasant than usual. The omnibus was uncomfortably crowded and a number of passengers were compelled to stand. Countrywomen from distant villages had been drawn to the seaside town by the annual drapery sales and were returning laden with parcels. They exchanged animated chatter about their purchases. Ailsa sat listening with her basket on her lap and wondered if the bargains compensated for such a tiring day. Certainly the bargain-seekers seemed to think so. They talked eagerly, with an excited inconsequence, jolting backwards and forwards as the heavy vehicle swayed like a lighted ark of refuge through the silent countryside. Outside, the driver, in his seat, steered an imperturbable course through the gloom. The darkness of the night blotted out everything. Ailsa, looking through the window, could see nothing but blackness, and could not tell where they were. She fancied they were passing the old toll-gate, where the road narrowed and the trees overhung. Yes, it must be the toll-gate. She could hear the branches tapping sharply on the window, as though asking for admission. The next moment the bus stopped.

The inside passengers looked round to see who was alighting, but through the window Ailsa saw the headlights of a large motor-car drawn into the side of the road. It was standing still, and she discerned a seated form in the car. The chauffeur stood in the road talking to the driver of the bus. From a few overheard words she gathered that the imposing car by the roadside had had a breakdown. A moment later the conductor, who had left his place to see what the trouble was, mounted the

step of the bus and put his head inside. He glanced round the crowded interior dubiously, and said:

"Can you make room for one more inside?"

His tone suggested that he doubted it. Ailsa saw a lady standing behind him in the road, apparently awaiting a response before venturing into the packed vehicle. There was something in her attitude which suggested age and weariness to the girl. She jumped up, basket in hand.

"Yes, please take my seat," she said.

The new passenger entered and sank into the vacated seat, and the bus went on.

The lady was muffled in furs and so heavily veiled that it was impossible to guess what kind of personality was concealed behind these wrappings. But Ailsa, standing near her, became conscious that the eyes beneath the veil were surveying her with interest. Presently the lady spoke.

"Tell me your name, please."

The voice from beneath the veil was a beautiful one, with a golden note in it. Indeed, the speaker had been famous for her voice before Ailsa was born, though, of course, Ailsa did not know that. She answered simply:

"My name is Ailsa Rose."

The lady seemed to regard her with a deeper interest from behind her heavy veil.

"Are you Mrs. Fenton's granddaughter?"

"Yes," said Ailsa.

"You live with her on the downs?"

Ailsa nodded.

"And are you not afraid of your lonely walk home?" inquired the other.

"No; not at all," rejoined Ailsa, in her own dainty voice.

The woman in the seat appeared to muse.

"You lead a lonely life for a young girl," she said, again intently regarding the girl through the dark lace veil which shrouded her face so completely. "You must have good nerves child."

Ailsa did not reply, and the arrival of the bus at her

destination put an end to the murmured conversation. But when she got down into the dark road she was aware that the lady in the corner seat was still regarding her with a fixed gaze from the lighted interior.

Ailsa waited in the road for the bus to depart. She liked watching it out of sight, the light streaming out from the open door, the rows of faces gleaming ruddy and clear within, the conductor among the milkcans behind. The last glimpse gave her a sense of company—a memory to carry home across the downs.

When the vehicle vanished round the first bend of the downward slope, Ailsa turned away for her homeward walk. The little village where she had alighted was surrounded by the downs, which loomed mysteriously around the handful of pigmy habitations embosomed in their heart of green. But Ailsa did not live in the village. She lived on the high downs themselves, and her home was more than a mile away.

She walked rapidly to the end of the short village street, passed the inn, the post office, and the village shop, and turned into a narrow grassy lane where the arched branches of the trees almost met overhead. In a couple of hundred yards the lane ended abruptly, and a gust of keen air, with a smack of tingling cold, blew in her face. The next moment the lane was left behind, and her feet were falling noiselessly on the short springy turf of the downs.

The solitude was perfect—and the darkness too. The downs were all about her now, vague outlines in the thick starless night, beneath a low sky. Ominous clouds were settling on Chanctonbury, and touching the ring of trees on its summit—"Chanctonbury putting on its night-cap," as the old shepherds said. That was a sign of bad weather; and, indeed, the masses of clouds rolling just above her head told Ailsa that one of the winter storms of wind and rain which broke with such fury on the downs was gathering force.

Ailsa went on quickly, guiding her footsteps by the light of a small electric torch which she took from her

basket. She was anxious to get home, not because she feared the dark. The darkness and the solitude held no terrors for her. She knew every slope, every ridge, every shadowy outline of the deserted way. The idea of being afraid on the downs at night would have made her smile. They were friendly to her at all times, at night as in the day. The love of them was in her Sussex blood, and she was happy on them always. She was a girl of the downs. She had been born and brought up on them, and something of their tranquil spirit was hers.

She walked on quite happily, thinking of little things, her footfall ghostlike on the soft downland grass. Her way took her across a succession of gently rounded slopes of alternate billow and hollow, with higher hills glimpsed and vanishing like giants running in the dark. At last she topped a higher ridge than usual, and in the corresponding valley there gleamed in the darkness a faint spot of light. She walked down the grassy slope which was the only approach to her home.

II

She reached the foot of the slope, and entered a rustic gate. On near view—in daylight—her grandmother's cottage was a small quaint gabled place, set in a three-cornered nook of the downs, and backed on a pine wood, which sheltered it from severe winds. At night, when darkness and the loneliness of the downs enveloped it, the isolated little place was difficult to see.

Ailsa put on her house shoes in the porch, and went in, closing the door behind her. Within, a lamp on the table illumined an oak-beamed room, and a woman sitting in the corner by a fire of logs. She looked round as the girl entered, and spoke.

"I am glad you are home, Ailsa. Aren't you late?"

"Yes; the bus was a little late."

Ailsa took off her hat and coat, unpacked her basket, and set about getting supper, glancing from time to time

at her grandmother as she did so. She was a small and slight old woman, of a kind of bygone prettiness still, with a strained look in her faded blue eyes, as if they were seeking something on a distant horizon. But the red glow of the fire revealed a pallor in her cheeks which frightened the girl. It was always the same latterly, after her shopping journey to the seaside town. What did she do in her absence? Surely she did not exert herself too much when the doctor had told her she must be careful because of her heart? Her grandmother sat quite still; her hands folded on her lap, a fixed unseeing gaze in her eyes, the strange pallor on her face.

Ailsa soon had the kettle boiling, and made the tea. She poured out a cup for the old woman, and gave it to her where she sat. The other merely took a sip or two, and put the cup on the table. Then she turned to the girl.

"Have a good supper, Ailsa. You must need it, after your long day. I don't want much."

Ailsa regarded her anxiously.

"You must eat something," she said. "I will boil you a nice egg. I got them from Mrs. Drane in the village this morning. She told me they were laid to-day."

Her grandmother shook a feeble head.

"I'll drink this cup of tea, but I don't want anything else. When you've had your supper I think I'll go to bed. I feel very tired."

"Would you like me to run down to the village and see if I could get you something?" asked the girl. "It wouldn't take me long. I brought home a little meat for to-morrow's dinner, but there is nothing else in the house. It is difficult to get things up here, on the downs."

"Difficult? Ay, it's difficult for the likes of us, because we're poor, and you have to carry up everything with your two hands."

"Oh, I wasn't complaining about that," said Ailsa, with a smile. "I don't mind bringing our food home. I like it."

"Ay, so you say now, because you're young and strong.

I thought t'same as you when I was young. You'll say different when you come to my age, and perhaps have to sit indoors as I do, from one week's end to the other, because I'm not able to get about. It's different for other folk. The downs are all right to live on if you have plenty of money, and a big motor car to ride in, like Lady Hilmerceux."

"Why, granny," said Ailsa, with an astonishing look, "what has Lady Hilmerceux to do with us?"

The old woman went on without noticing her, as if talking to herself, in a kind of weak fury.

"She hasn't to live here through the winter months in a cottage she wouldn't put her butler in, and sit over the fire through the long black nights when the wind shrieks across the bare downs and shakes the place like it was built of cards. She's in a big comfortable house, well shielded from the wind, with comforts, and servants, and if she doesn't like the downs in winter she can go where she likes. South o' France, Madeira, or any foreign place where her fancy inclines. But we've got to stay here in the howling darkness, whether we want to or not."

"Oh, but I like being here," said Ailsa simply, "and I don't want to go anywhere else. I love the downs in summer and winter. The love of them was born in me, I suppose. You ought to love them too, grandmother, because you were born here—like me."

"I hate them!"

Ailsa looked at her without speaking, and went on with her supper. She was well aware that her grandmother was strange, and a little weak-minded at times. The old woman had sunk back over the fire, nodding her head vacantly, as if at some secret reflection.

Ailsa washed up in the kitchen with the door open, so as to keep an eye on the nodding figure by the fire. When she had finished she returned to the sitting-room, and put her arm round the old woman's shoulders.

"Would you like to go to bed now, granny, dear?" she said coaxingly.

The old woman lifted her head and nodded like a child. The firelight brought out a curious resemblance between the old face, looking up, and the young face, bent over it. At that moment it was plain that the older woman had been more than pretty in her day, with traces of the soft, fair hair, and sweetly vivid coloring which made for actual beauty in her granddaughter. But the resemblance died away more quickly than the leaping flame in the fire, leaving a faded old woman with graying temples in an armchair. Ailsa stooped over her.

"Come along, granny, dear. I'll take you to bed."

III

A little later Ailsa came downstairs alone, a slender figure in her dark dress, her fair hair hanging low. The firelight gleamed on the homely interior, the oak beams of the ceiling, the simple furniture, and the coiled and sleeping shape of the dog. On the table the lamp burned low beneath its shade, throwing a yellow pool of light on the red tablecloth. The girl turned up the wick and stood by the circle of light, evidently deep in thought. Then, pushing back her hair from her face, she walked across to the window. Partly drawing back the green casement curtain, she looked out on the downs.

Her eyes ranged the darkness intently, like one seeking something there. As she looked a faint light twinkled afar in the distance, and then died away.

"A light at Mouldering House again," the girl murmured. "I wonder what it means?"

Mouldering House was a desolate, deserted place half a mile across country, the only other edifice on that part of the downs. It stood in a deep depression where the downs fell steeply, and was completely hidden from sight a short distance away. Although partly visible from the high level of the cottage windows from which Ailsa now gazed, it could be seen from no other portion of the downs

except the summit of Chanctonbury. The stark gray building was supposed to have been an early religious house; it was certainly a great antiquity, topped with a long sloping roof in which a kind of flat window or skylight gleamed like an eye on moonlight nights, and encircled by a dense wilderness of undergrowth and stunted trees, which intensified its grim, secretive nature. Unoccupied for a great number of years, the desolate, ancient place was in evil local repute, and was supposed to be haunted. Ailsa was as free from nerves as any girl in England, and accustomed to walk home across the downs in the dark, but nothing would have induced her to venture near Mouldering House after nightfall. Once, penetrating the undergrowth before it, she had scanned the gray, crumbling walls in awe, and had seen a large dark-hued bird flap heavily out of the dense coppice at the side of the house.

No; decidedly Ailsa could not imagine anyone going near this queer relic of mediævalism at night. It was in a lonely spot of the downs where few ever went, and the folk roundabout had shunned the place for years. And yet, she had seen a light. Last night as well. . . . She stood, looking out.

A faint cry above her head startled her.

"Ailsa!"

The girl left the window and ran upstairs. A small glow lamp had been left burning on a table by the landing. She picked it up and carried it into her grandmother's bedroom. In the small gabled room with a sloping ceiling she found her grandmother sitting up in bed, a curious gray pallor on her withered cheeks. Ailsa ran to her and put an arm round her.

"What is it, grandmother?"

"Ailsa, there was a light in Mouldering House. I saw it from here. What can it be?"

So her grandmother had seen it also. Ailsa endeavored to soothe her.

"Hush, grandmother; do not excite yourself. You

know what the doctor said. Perhaps it is a shepherd sheltering at Mouldering House."

"Shepherd!" The scorn of a countrywoman spoke. "What would a shepherd be doing in that part of the downs when there are no sheep nearer than Stump Bottom? It's no shepherd. It's a beacon—a warning—for me. . . . God help us both, that light is for me. I know, I know."

"Granny, dear, you must not give way to these fancies."

But the old woman kept her eyes fixed upon the narrow slit of window where the drawn curtains did not quite meet. As she held her grandmother in her arms Ailsa felt a tremor run through her thin body, and then the old woman buried her face in her hands. Presently she lifted vacant eyes to her granddaughter's face.

"Ailsa, is that you?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh, hold me tight! I've been lost—wandering on the downs in the darkness, and I found myself in Mouldering House. Then the light came—yes, the light. . . . She broke off shuddering violently. "*He* held it—he, who has been in his grave in Tullington Churchyard for many years. Ailsa, Ailsa, hold me—don't let me go!"

"It was only a dream, dear. You are quite safe—safe with Ailsa at home."

The old woman lay quiescent in Ailsa's arms, but the girl could feel her heart beating furiously in her breast—an angry enemy threatening her feeble existence. In a few minutes, however, the hidden tumult lessened, and the gray pallor waned in the thin cheeks. Meantime, she grew calmer, and closed her eyes again, and ultimately dropped into slumber once more.

Ailsa sat there holding her hand. Outside the trees at the back of the cottage stirred with the menace of a coming storm. Through the window Ailsa could see the rooks' untidy nests in the topmost branches nodding and shaking tremulously, like a group of decrepit crones wagging unkempt heads over some scandal of monstrous

salacity, uplifting withered arms. The murmur of the boughs became louder, and the tossing of limbs more vehement. The whole wood was trembling and rustling now.

Storms in winter on the treeless heights of the downs were sometimes tremendous things. The gabled cottage was well sheltered by the little wood from the prevailing winds, but there were nights when Ailsa, awakening in her little room to the sound of the rain falling in sheets and the winds shouting in voices of thunder from the top of Cissbury to the summit of Chanctonbury Ring, thought of the cottage as a frail ark in the lonely green surges of the downs, and she and her grandmother left alone in the last disaster of the world. But that night the storm delayed so long that it seemed possible it might not come at all. The old woman slept peacefully. After watching her some time longer Ailsa went into her room adjoining, undressed, and noiselessly slipped into bed. She put out the candle, and the little house was in darkness. Soon after she fell asleep.

She was aroused from a sound sleep by the coming of the storm. A great gale was trumpeting over the downs, and the trees in the wood were groaning and cracking as she had never known them do before. The wind had forced a way through the protecting screen, and blew sharply on her face through the open window. Turning on her side, with the blankets tucked up to her chin, she watched the conflict between the elements and the darkly-swaying wood. The wind swept through the wood in a tempestuous rush. The sturdy trees stood firm, shaking their tops in defiance. "You shan't get through," they seemed to sigh, and the baffled wind cried in return, "I will!" Then a brief lull would ensue, followed by the uneasy shuddering of the thick ivy-screen between the trees, as the wind returned more stealthily to the attack. But the wood was always too much for it in the long run. It was thick, and the tree-trunks close, so by the time the

wind reached the window it was like a force penetrating enemy lines at too great a cost. Most of its strength was spent, and its fury abated.

But suppose the wind uprooted one of the trees? Ailsa, eyeing the desperate tossing of the wooded screen, asked herself that question now, as she had asked it many times before. She had debated the point with her father when he was alive. Her father, knowing something of winds, always said that the trees stood too close together for any wind to blow one of them down. So far his opinion had proved right. No tree had yet fallen; but that was not to say none ever would. Looking at them apprehensively now, Ailsa wondered if it was likely to happen that night. The tree-tops were shaking like feathers. Suppose that long thin specter of a beech, cracking and flexing with the quick docility of a whip, were to snap in the middle and fall on the house? What then? Ailsa wished it were daylight. Such possibilities seemed more remote and less likely in the kindly light of day.

It had grown cold too. Not that it had been warm before, but there are degrees of cold even on the downs in January. Ailsa found herself shivering. She snuggled deeper into her little bed, but the cold seemed to creep down after her. She slipped from the sheets to close the window, which she kept wide open summer and winter. Lighting the candle, she went into her grandmother's room to look at her, and was relieved to find she was sleeping soundly. Hesitatingly she glanced towards the closed casement of the window, wondering whether anyone was still keeping mysterious vigil at Mouldering House in the blackness of the storm. But she did not look to see. Quickly she returned to her own room, put out the candle, and got back into bed.

Drowsily she lay for a while between waking and sleeping, listening to the wind and the sound of the rain on the roof. Again she thought of the cottage as an ark, a solitary cockshell on the great green sea of the downs, lashed by

the fury of the storm. She wondered, dreamily now, if her bed was actually rocking.

With that thought she fell asleep, and had a strange dream, the result, perhaps, of her last waking fancy. She dreamt the gabled cottage had broken loose from its moorings, and was floating and pitching in a storm on the middle of the downs, which were no longer firm but tossed into great turfy billows by the force of the gale, heaving upwards and downwards in spasmodic convulsions like an earthquake. The phenomenon terrified her greatly. The little house, lurching like a ship in the great turf billows, seemed to be moving fast. After some time it became stationary, and she discovered in surprise that it had come to a standstill on Chanctonbury Ring, which rose from the unstable downs about it like Mount Ararat.

She was glad to step out on firm land. But on looking down from the Ring on the far side she saw that that flat level of the Weald far below was covered with water, which was rising rapidly towards the towering crest on which she stood. In this water a great number of drowning people swept across the tortured range of her sleeping vision, struggling and swimming in the mounting flood. As they surged upward she stooped over to help them, but before she could reach them the water receded, and each time it rose again there were fewer drowning faces than before. At length only one remained, a young and fair-headed man, who carried a shepherd's crook in his hand and sang a strange song. The water mounted again, only this time it did not retreat, but surged higher and higher with the solitary swimmer, still lifting his voice in song. When he was so near that she could have touched him she bent toward him, holding out her hand. But he sank out of sight with a loud cry. As he went down the words of the song he had been singing seemed to come floating up out of the depths to her on the heights:

"I've been to Plymouth and I've been in Dover
I have been rambling all the world over—

Over and over and over and over;

Drink up your liquor and turn the cup over—

Over and over and over and over;

The liquor's dranked up and the cup is turned over."

Her return to consciousness was gradual and while still between sleeping and waking a thin high voice not far away seemed to break into the sleep-drugged current of her thoughts with the old harvest song of her dreams. Afterwards she could not be sure whether she heard it or not, but always believed she did, because she recalled it so clearly. But, dreaming or waking, it sunk into her mind, and aroused her finally with a start. She found herself sitting up in bed, looking around in the dark.

The house was silent now, and the storm had passed away.

Then a faint noise caught her ears. She listened intently, nervously. It was the sound of a door opening downstairs.

She jumped from her bed quickly, fear hammering at her brain. Lighting the candle with trembling hand, she passed into the adjoining room. Her grandmother's bed was empty. What had happened? Where had she gone? Had she groped her way downstairs, and gone out on the downs? These thoughts came with her desperate anxiety, as she stood there. And they were answered by a shrill cry which rang through the house.

"William? Ah, no, no!"

With chill foreboding Ailsa hurried down the little staircase, screening her candle with her hand. At the foot of the stairs the faint light fell on her grandmother, standing at the open back door, staring out at the wood. Her lips were moving in speech, but there was no visible shape to hold converse with there.

"Will, Will, . . . No!"

The old woman threw her arms out in the darkness, as if waving something away, then staggered back feebly and sought to close the door. Ailsa ran forward and

caught her as she was about to fall. Her upturned face glanced piteously at her granddaughter, a look of terror in her eyes. Then her head drooped forward on the girl's shoulder, and Ailsa, carrying her to the couch in her strong young arms, knew that she was dead.

CHAPTER IV

A VISIT

I

Ailsa lit the lamp, and looked down at the still face. It was her first confrontation with the invisible power which is greater than life. She was not afraid. It did not seem so terrible as the other thing: the summons which had called her grandmother out of the mortal flesh, and stamped that expression of shrunken fear on her face. What shadowy illusion had beckoned her downstairs, what had she seen as she stood at the doorway, peering into the wood? And what had startled the rooks, and set them flying and cawing mournfully in mid-air? She could not tell, but she felt that such thoughts were best banished from her mind just then. With a gentle movement she covered the slight form with a rug, then opened the front door, and looked out.

The outline of the downs stretched before her, familiar and dim. Above her head great clouds rolled low. They looked to Ailsa like two armies fighting: horsemen a-gallop, others on foot. In a clear space between was a cloud like a winged giant, astride a huge horse, waving sword and shield. The phantom armies rolled towards him, met, merged, and began to dissolve, floating away towards Cissbury, leaving the sky overhead a clear blue. The darkness lessened imperceptibly. The first faint coming of dawn was in the air.

The girl closed the door and went upstairs. She came down again after a few minutes, dressed to go to the village for help. Before leaving the cottage on this mission she stepped softly across to the couch, and looked down at her grandmother once more. The fear had now

gone from the dead woman's face, replaced by an expression of profound and lasting peace. Ailsa, after standing there for a moment, covered the face again, and quietly let herself out of the cottage.

Outside the gray dawn was visible in the distant hills, and in the trees the rooks, no longer startled, were cawing to one another with the reluctant sleepy mutter of half-awakened birds. A fox barked sharply from the wood. Faint patches of light were beginning to show in the depths of the trees. Ailsa locked the cottage door behind her, and set out for the village across the lightening downs.

II

Later, when others were in the house, she felt the sense of bereavement more, and began to realize how utterly she was left alone in the world through her grandmother's death. She had few friends, and no relations apart from the woman whose dead body was now lying upstairs in the gabled bedroom. Her mother had died soon after her birth, and her father had been drowned at sea, lost in a ship sunk by a German submarine during the war. Ailsa had lived practically the whole of her life with her grandmother in the little cottage on the downs.

Of her mother she knew nothing beyond that she had died in giving her birth and slept in Tullington Churchyard beneath a plain stone, which said that Lydia Rose, beloved wife of Richard Rose, aged 21, was buried there. She had clearer recollections of her father, a tall, bronzed man, whose occupation had taken him mysteriously beyond the seas, from whence he emerged at long intervals with exotic presents for his little daughter. She remembered he had once brought her home a parrot, but the gaudy alien had proved a sinister, unrestful spirit in the quietude of the downs, frightening the thrushes and blackbirds and tits with wild screeches from the wicker cage hanging at the cottage door. While Ailsa was giving the parrot water one day it escaped, winging a rainbow flight sea-

ward across the placid English green of the downs. The little English songsters were not sorry when it disappeared, and Ailsa's regrets at her loss were not very deep.

Then there had followed a brief period of boarding-school in the seaside town, brought to a close by a German submarine, for the torpedo which extinguished her father's life in a distant sea at the same time ended the payment of further school fees. Her father left no money behind him, so Ailsa returned home to the cottage on the downs and her grandmother, who was no longer fitted to be there alone, and at times needed much looking after. The old woman lived in the cottage rent free, on a small monthly allowance from Hilmerceux, with which sum Ailsa, by careful management, contrived to make ends meet.

Now this peaceful, simple life was over, and she had to take stock of the future. Her grandmother had left a legacy of poverty. Many years before the old woman's husband had disappeared while boating in Cornwall with the Honorable Harry Hilmerceux, and the big house, in whose service he had been, had paid his wages to his widow ever since. Of course they would be stopped now, and Ailsa would have to leave the cottage on the downs where she had been born, and had lived nearly all her life. She had more regret at that thought just then than reflections about her future. For the downs held her heart, and she could not imagine living anywhere else. She loved their soft beauty, their quiet solitude and wide heights. She knew them in all their moods. In the loneliness of her life the great undulating green spaces had grown very near to her, and she looked upon them as her friends. Now, it seemed, she and they would have to part.

As she looked upon them with slow affection she saw a dark, glistening object traversing the billowy vista of green. It was a motor car, driven fast across the downs. Ailsa wondered who had the temerity to drive a car there. The downs were private property, and it was not permitted to use them in that way. Then she perceived that the car was coming straight across the short turf in the

direction of the cottage gate. She stood still, watching its quick and flashing approach.

The car reached the cottage, and stopped outside the rustic gate. The chauffeur got down from his seat and opened the door of the car for a lady whom he helped to alight. Then he remounted the car to drive on a little way to turn round, and the lady walked up the little path towards the cottage.

Ailsa, meeting her shyly at the door, was conscious of the scrutiny of the visitor's dark eyes. She was a tall and slim woman, beautifully dressed, of a dark, patrician type. She was elderly, though her face and figure did not suggest it; to Ailsa, rather dazzled by the apparition of her presence there, she did not look old at all. The visitor kept her eyes upon the girl.

"I am Lady Hilmerceux," she said. "I have heard of your bereavement, and came to see if there was anything I could do for you."

"Will you come inside, Lady Hilmerceux?" said Ailsa timidly.

Lady Hilmerceux crossed the porch into the homely sitting room. Ailsa placed a chair for her, and she sat down.

"It was so good of you to give me your seat in the omnibus last night," she said.

"I did not know it was you," murmured Ailsa, in reply.

She had known the voice again as soon as she heard it—the voice with a golden note, sweet, but sad too. The girl had often mused over the unhappy lot of the great lady of Hilmerceux, who had lost all her sons in the war, and now lived alone in the big house on the other side of the downs, practically a recluse. There was a great deal of gossip in the village about the last occupant of Hilmerceux: stories of her wealth, her eccentricities, and the strange solitary life she led at Hilmerceux with a reduced staff of servants, with three-parts of the mansion shut up. The Hilmerceux, of which she was the last

survivor, had been a great Sussex family in their day, with an estate running over the downs for many miles around, and a wonderful terraced house in a deer-park with a lovely ornamental lake. And now Lady Hilmerceux was sitting in the cottage, looking at her with soft dark eyes; eyes which were quite disillusioned but by no means resigned.

"That made the courtesy greater," said Lady Hilmerceux in response to the girl's remark.

Ailsa did not speak. She felt intuitively that Lady Hilmerceux had come there for some special reason, and she waited for her to state what it was. She was nervous in her presence also. The visitor lifted her sombre eyes again.

"Was anyone with you when your grandmother died?"

"No," said Ailsa.

In speaking Lady Hilmerceux subdued her sweet voice to the softest note, as if in deference to the unseen presence of death above their heads. That thought may have quickened her realization of the position of the girl by her side. She glanced at her gently.

"Now that you are left alone, what do you propose to do?"

"I do not know yet," replied Ailsa. "I have not had time to think."

"Obviously you cannot stay here," said Lady Hilmerceux, looking about her.

Ailsa's eyes filled with tears.

"No, I suppose not," she murmured.

"One must look facts in the face," Lady Hilmerceux went on. "It is always best. You have no ideas about the future then?"

Ailsa shook her head. She had no plans at that moment of any kind.

"Have you any other relatives?"

Ailsa said she had never heard of any. "Grandmother was quite alone in the world except for me," she added.

The great lady's face softened to a deeper sympathy.

"That makes it easier for what I wish to suggest to you," she said. "Did you know that your grandmother came to see me at Hilmerceux recently?"

She made this announcement quietly, her eyes still contemplating the girl's wistful charm. But Ailsa was astonished and confused by her words.

"No; I did not know," she nervously rejoined.

"Your grandmother appeared to realize that she had not long to live," she went on. "She came to arouse my interest in her granddaughter. She begged me to look after you if anything happened to her."

"Oh, grandmother should not have bothered you about me. She was——"

The girl broke off quickly, with a look of distress. Lady Hilmerceux bent over and touched her hand.

"My dear," she said, "I think I understand. I know your grandmother was feeble-minded at times, and that you have sacrificed yourself to look after her. But she knew what she was doing when she visited Hilmerceux. She was quite right in coming to me. She lived on the estate, and we Hilmerceux have always prided ourselves in looking after our tenants' welfare. And that is really what has brought me here to-day. I have a suggestion to make to you."

She paused for a moment, absently turning over the leaves of an album of old photographs on the table beside her, as if considering the words in which her proposal should be put. Ailsa waited in silence for her to continue. Then her companion spoke again.

"My dear child. I have come to ask you to live at Hilmerceux with me as my companion."

Ailsa had listened to her words prepared for something, but not for this. But Lady Hilmerceux spoke with the air of a woman announcing a considered decision, without expecting a reply. Ailsa was certainly in no frame of mind at that moment to make an adequate rejoinder to this unexpected and kindly offer. She could only murmur hurriedly:

"I don't think I quite understand you, Lady Hilmerceux."

Lady Hilmerceux was patient. She explained at greater length. She made it clear to the girl that she was offering her a salaried post as companion. Ailsa sat quite overwhelmed, powerless to consider the offer or express her thoughts. The soft voice went on again:

"I have lived too much alone of late years, my dear—too much in the past. I have been alone in the world for some years now, as perhaps you know, living in that great house with no other company but my sad thoughts. It is not good to live a solitary life. If you care to come and stay with me I shall be glad. Now how does my proposal appeal to you? Tell me quite frankly."

She waited quietly for Ailsa to reply, and Ailsa did, in a hurried little effort to convey gratitude and thanks.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Lady Hilmerceux"—rather breathlessly—"but I am afraid——"

"Of what are you afraid my child?"

Ailsa hesitated, in an effort to express her confused thoughts.

"I may not be suitable," was all she could find to say.

Lady Hilmerceux smiled upon her agitation, and rose to her feet.

"Yes; you will come," she said. "I wish it. I shall want you to read and talk to me. It will be rather a dull life for you. But you are used to a quiet life, are you not?"

"Yes," said Ailsa nervously.

"Well then, it is all arranged. When I saw your face in the omnibus last night I thought how I should like to have you near me always. This morning, when I heard of your grandmother's death, it seemed to me that our chance meeting last night was opportune."

"You are very kind," murmured Ailsa, and, indeed, she was grateful.

Lady Hilmerceux smiled.

“The kindness is yours. Now when will you come to Hilmerceux?”

“I must wait until after the funeral,” rejoined Ailsa unsteadily. “Grandmother never liked me to be long away from her when she was alive, and I should not like to leave her now—until it is all over.”

Lady Hilmerceux met the girl’s appealing gaze with a swift look, and then, as if prompted by a sudden impulse, bent and kissed her.

“Of course not—I understand. Well, I will send some one to stay with you until then.” She turned as if to go, then said quickly: “May I see your grandmother?”

Ailsa took her upstairs. The woman sitting there by the dead rose in a tremor and made way for the visitor to approach. Lady Hilmerceux stood by the bedside gazing down at the face on the pillow.

“She looks peaceful,” she said softly.

She did, but it was the peace of tired old age, glad to be done with life for ever. The fleeting semblance of youth she had worn on the previous night had disappeared and it was a tired old woman who slept there. With another glance Lady Hilmerceux turned away.

CHAPTER V

HILMERCEUX

I

Hilmerceux is to be seen at a distance from the high bridle path which winds across the downs from Steyning by way of Chanctonbury to Lorington, ten miles away. Where the path loops round an old Roman well, the downs to the north mysteriously unfold for a far glimpse of the place, then appear to fold up again when the well is left behind. It is like the swift rise and fall of a drop curtain—a mere peep, and nothing more. From the old coaching road, which you cross three miles farther on, the house is not visible at all. It lies far back, screened from the road by the great park.

At close view the mansion, a rectangle of dark brick, is large and gaunt, showing plain traces of a mingling of styles. The south front is Elizabethan, but the east and west wings are partly of earlier date. Two of the great fireplaces and the eastern wall are of stone. The theory is that the existing place was built on the site of a former fortified house, of which remnants have been worked into the present building. In fact, there is some mention of this in the family records deposited in the British Museum.

But if the house is not altogether beautiful, the great sheet of ornamental water before it is, and lends the glamor of the picturesque to the old place, especially in summer, when the lilies on the surface are in bloom. The lake, which is below the level of the house, is reached from the terrace by flagged garden paths and sloping lawns. These crossed, the lake lies before you, oval in shape, with a wide margin of reeds, a small island in the center, a pair

of swans on the placid surface, and a few carp of great size in the clear depths.

The ancient gray footbridge spanning the water rises in a gentle arch to the park on the far side. The park was once famous and is still historical. "It is," states Lingmer in his almost forgotten work on the parks of the county, "full of old oaks, which hath a look of great antiquity." The same chronicler writes of the deer forest and heronry adjoining. In the heronry it seems, he counted 109 nests. The herons and the deer have long since gone, but the park with its old oak trees is otherwise unchanged.

At the end of the park and beyond the lake, not far from the last outward curve of the great sweeping drive, rises the strange Place of Watch, where in bygone times a family retainer watched night and day during the last illness of the head of the house. When death took place he received a signal, and would then descend from the look-out to mark the time of death on a clock-face built in the wall of the room below. This done he remained at the Place of Watch until the night of the funeral, to open the grille and greet the new lord as the cortège wound by. After that it was closed again, and opened no more until the next Hilmerceux came to die. But the quaint custom had long been discontinued, and the Place of Watch abandoned to the owls which haunt the ivy-mantled turret.

It was on the terrace, a day after the sale of furniture and effects of her grandmother's cottage, that Ailsa stood, a shy and charming figure, waiting for an answer to her ring at the door of her new home. As she waited she glanced around in rapture at the loveliness of park and garden and lawn. Presently a maid admitted her, and showed her to the drawing-room, where Lady Hilmerceux welcomed her. She took the young girl's hands and kissed her, expressing the hope that she had had a pleasant drive.

"Yes, thank you, Lady Hilmerceux," said Ailsa. "It was very pleasant."

They had tea together—a rather silent meal. Lady

Hilmerceux seemed preoccupied, and Ailsa did not venture upon speech. As she took her tea she looked at intervals about her at the beautiful room in which they sat. At last Lady Hilmerceux turned to her with a kindly smile.

"I trust you will be very happy here with me, Ailsa."

Ailsa turned with a start from a contemplation of a "Nymph Surprised by Satyrs" hanging on the farther wall.

"Yes, Lady Hilmerceux, I'm sure I shall," she said.

"I lead a quiet life, and keep no company," said the elder lady.

"I like being quiet," rejoined Ailsa, with a bright smile.

There was another period of silence. Lady Hilmerceux put her cup down.

"Would you like to see the house, Ailsa?"

That brought Ailsa to her feet with a delightfully eager, "Yes, Lady Hilmerceux, I should very much." Lady Hilmerceux took her round, beginning at the gun-room, where swords and old armor were kept, and next to a hall with a carven ceiling, with the arms of Queen Elizabeth emblazoned on the walls. Ailsa did not know they were Elizabeth's arms, but she recognized her picture nearby, above the grim figure of a knight in armor, who seemed to be guarding the broad way upstairs. The great Queen was in velvet and ruffs, red hair glowing like flame, and haughty cruel eyes staring into the gloom. Lady Hilmerceux explained to the girl that the Queen had once stayed at Hilmerceux, coming to Sussex to consult the head of the house on some grave and urgent matter of state.

"Elizabeth was believed to have been in love with him—at least, for a time. The Lord Hilmerceux of her day was a soldier and statesman, and an exceedingly handsome man. His portrait is upstairs. Eventually he lost his life through the Queen."

Ailsa innocently hoped to herself that he was not beheaded on Tower Hill, like poor Sir Walter Raleigh, but

Lady Hilmerceux did not enlighten her on the point. They went on, from room to room over the house. The pilgrimage left on Ailsa's mind an impression of long corridors and innumerable rooms, many sheeted and dismantled; of forgotten faces in massive frames on dim walls; a home of faded splendor, where the spirit of the past now brooded alone. It was all very wonderful and enchanting, and the girl gazed about her with radiant face and sparkling eyes, listening breathlessly to the stories Lady Hilmerceux told her of the house and its past.

Lady Hilmerceux was touched by Ailsa's interest. She found her charming—an unspoilt and innocent child, steeped in the fragrance of the downs. She was very glad she had decided to bring her there. Yes, it was well. After all, it was good to have a young face in Hilmerceux again. She could see no flaws in the porcelain, and hoped there were none to find. She thought not. The girl was all innocence; or so it seemed. The bitterness of her own isolation—of her solitary life—would be mitigated by this dainty and bright presence there. Yes; a very good arrangement for both.

They reached the portrait gallery. Lady Hilmerceux switched on the light at the door before entering the long interior of frames against a dark background. Midway she paused.

“Look, Ailsa,” she said.

She wanted to show the girl the portrait of the warrior-statesman who had lifted his eyes to the Virgin Queen. But Ailsa did not hear her. She was standing a little distance away, absorbed in the portrait of a young man with a handsome vivid face and dark eyes, who looked so lifelike that she felt he might step from his great frame down to her on the floor. Impulsively she addressed Lady Hilmerceux, now coming towards her.

“What a wonderful picture, Lady Hilmerceux, and what a handsome man!”

The other heard her in silence. Looking up, Ailsa saw

a sad expression on her face, and felt that she should not have spoken about the picture. Lady Hilmerceux answered calmly:

"That is Harry Hilmerceux, who went to Cornwall forty years ago on a fishing holiday, accompanied by your grandfather, as his servant. Neither was seen alive again. Your grandfather's body was washed ashore near Land's End some time afterwards, and brought home to be buried in Tullington Churchyard, as you know."

They were standing before the portrait, side by side. Lady Hilmerceux took Ailsa by the arm, and led her away to another part of the gallery.

"Here is a picture I wish you to see," she said.

Ailsa looked at it obediently. She saw a full-length portrait group of a lady in the center of some children with laughing eyes. The girl clasped her hands.

"It is you!" she said softly. "You look beautiful."

"Yes, it is a picture of myself and my dear children," was the slow response. She went on, with a sigh: "This is a place of memories, my child. Sometimes I think it is a place of illusions as well."

Ailsa thought it was a beautiful picture. Looking timidly into the sad face of the woman who had lived for years in the house alone, she would have liked to express the sympathy of her young heart at the death of the children, but nervousness tied her tongue. Lady Hilmerceux said nothing more; merely waited until the girl had finished looking at the painting. Then she took Ailsa from the gallery rather quickly, as if glad to leave it.

Downstairs they went. Lady Hilmerceux opened a door.

"Come in here, Ailsa," she said.

It was a small room with dainty furniture and delicate coloring, looking out on the lawns, with a glimpse of the lake.

"Sit down, dear," said Lady Hilmerceux, "while I ring for the housekeeper."

She did so, and gave a message to a maid. Ailsa sat

still, a ray of sunshine in her hair, looking out at the swans on the distant lake. Lady Hilmerceux stood watching her in silence.

The housekeeper made her appearance, a short and stout woman, with a round and pleasant face.

"Mrs. Perrins," said Lady Hilmerceux, "this is Miss Ailsa Rose. She will go to her room and rest till dinner time. Will you please take her there yourself? I want her to feel quite at home with you. What room have you prepared for her?"

"The Blue Room in the east wing, my lady."

"That is rather far away," said Lady Hilmerceux thoughtfully. "I should have preferred her nearer to me."

"Well, I did think of the White Room, my lady, but it is not prepared, and needs redecorating. So I had the Blue Room turned out instead. That side of the house gets the most sun."

Lady Hilmerceux turned to Ailsa and asked her if she minded sleeping in rather a lonely part of the house. Ailsa, with a shy smile, said she did not mind at all.

"All the windows on the east side look out on the downs. The view is considered very fine. You will like that, Ailsa, will you not?"

"Oh, yes," said Ailsa, "I shall like that very much. I love the downs."

At this expression of opinion the housekeeper kindled with an enthusiasm of her own.

"There is a glorious view from your window, Miss Rose—one of the best in the South of England. You can see the racehorses exercising in the morning."

"The Blue Room is not damp, Mrs. Perrins?" asked Lady Hilmerceux anxiously. "It is a long while since it has been occupied."

"You need not have the slightest fear, my lady," replied Mrs. Perrins.

"Very well; it will do. And now, Mrs. Perrins, you had better take Miss Rose there. I am sure she would like

to rest." She glanced at Ailsa. "I will leave you in Mrs. Perrins's hands just now. Dinner is at eight o'clock."

II

Ailsa found herself in a pretty bedroom looking out on a part of the downs unfamiliar to her, with a string of racehorses pacing on the skyline, and a glimpse of Black Patch in the distance. After resting a while she put on her new black dress and sat by the window until the gong sounded. She then went slowly down the beautiful wide staircase to face the ordeal of dinner.

She knew where the drawing-room was and opened the door nervously. The room was in darkness, so she walked along the corridor to the dining-room. The door was ajar, and within she saw Lady Hilmerceux seated by a glowing log fire talking to a man standing before it.

"Oh, here you are, Ailsa!" she said, as the girl entered. Rising from her low chair by the fire, she crossed to meet her. Ailsa felt very small in the large room.

"Ailsa," said Lady Hilmerceux, "this is my steward, Mr. Radford, who will join us at dinner. He is a very busy man, and I do not see much of him."

Lady Hilmerceux was dressed for dinner in gray velvet and lace, with a gleaming red jewel hanging by a long chain round her neck. Ailsa thought she had never seen anyone look so wonderful as she stood there, as if she had just stepped out of one of the pictures in the gallery upstairs. She felt quite awed before this magnificent figure. But Lady Hilmerceux thought Ailsa looked charming, with her fair hair and skin and black dress. She turned to the man by the fire.

"Ailsa is going to stay with me indefinitely, Radford," she said.

The steward stared at Ailsa with a kind of challenging glance, then came across to her and held out his hand.

Ailsa remembered having seen him once before, riding along the village road. She glanced at him now in a kind

of wonder. He was a striking figure, and one of great repute in the countryside as the man who was practically master of the Hilmerceux estate. He was rugged and gray, like granite. And there was something of the enduring quality of granite about him: in the steady gleam of his cold eyes, and the immovable expression of his rough-hewn face and compressed clean-shaven lips. It would be easier to pierce granite than to read his mind, Ailsa thought. She looked at him now, but could not guess what he was thinking of her. She felt a little afraid of him. But when he spoke, his voice was kindly.

"I hope you will be quite happy here," was all he said.

"Thank you," said Ailsa. "I am sure I shall."

For a moment there was silence. Then Lady Hilmerceux spoke:

"As you came in, Ailsa, I was telling Mr. Radford how fond you are of the downs, and that I would like a horse for you to ride over them. Can you ride, my dear?"

"No," murmured Ailsa.

"Then we must have you taught. You ought to look well on horseback. Who could give her some lessons, Radford?"

The steward thought.

"Williams will be best," he said. "He was well taught in the army. There's a young gray mare at pasture in Threetrees paddock which will do for her."

Lady Hilmerceux nodded.

"I wish you would arrange all that, and I will see about her outfit."

Ailsa was trying to find words to thank her when the butler came forward to inform her ladyship that dinner was served.

CHAPTER VI

AILSA

I

Very different was Ailsa's life now. As the days went by she recovered from the shock of her grandmother's death, and the memory of her former solitary existence began to fade. Lady Hilmerceux was to her a kind of fairy queen, who by a wave of her hand had transported her from the little cottage on the other side of the downs into this rich old house, and given her pretty clothes and a horse to ride.

The girl took it calmly, but sometimes she pondered over her change of fortune with a puzzled look in her unsearchable blue eyes, trying to understand why it had come about. Ailsa did not know what she gave in return for it all. She was quite unspoilt as yet, and it never entered her head to consider whether youth and prettiness and grateful companionship were not a fair exchange for a new dress, a little gray horse, and the privilege of living with a great lady who had spent lonely years at Hilmerceux with no other companion than memory.

Ailsa thought the kindness to her sprang from that distant episode of the past to which Lady Hilmerceux had made reference during her visit to the cottage. The girl had but a vague knowledge of this almost forgotten event, but she understood that nearly forty years before the chatelaine of Hilmerceux had taken her grandmother to Cornwall to identify the dead body which had been cast up. The horror of identifying a corpse which had been for some time in the sea, and the subsequent sordid ordeal of the inquest, had made the grandmother—in the Sussex vernacular—"sträänge"; and "strange" she had remained until her death, subject to fits of excitement if her

husband's name was mentioned in her presence. Never a strong-minded woman, this experience had deepened the effect of an earlier shock sustained as a young girl, when she was lost on the downs during a fog, and found unconscious next morning near Chanctonbury by the man she was about to marry.

That was all Ailsa knew of a story forgotten before she was born. Her grandmother now slept beside the drowned man in the churchyard with the two arching yews, beneath a small tombstone which had been the gift of Hilmerceux, and put up many years before to mark appreciation of one who had been "a faithful servant and humble friend to the Hilmerceux family"—so ran the inscription to the drowned man brought back from Cornwall, carved in enduring marble above the spot where he had been laid, not far from the yew tree which spanned the path.

Ailsa, walking up the mossy path to church on Sunday mornings, had often paused to read the epitaph to her grandfather, William Fenton, with the text underneath: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Now Lady Hilmerceux had caused the name of Ailsa's grandmother to be added—"Esther, wife of the above. And in their death they were not divided." The new and glittering black lettering made a strong contrast to the faded words of the original inscription.

But Lady Hilmerceux never spoke of this obliterated memory, and Ailsa had not the courage to inquire. There was something about her which held Ailsa spell-bound, even when she was kindest. She always appeared wonderful and fascinating to her, though occasionally a little terrifying and incomprehensible. Because of her varying moods she was rather trying to live with. Ailsa supposed she had been so long alone that she found it difficult to get used to another presence there.

But the girl found her lovable in spite of all. She had the glamour of personality: that rare essence which is

distilled by certain temperaments until the last moment of life. At times she reminded Ailsa of the portrait of herself in the picture gallery upstairs. Even Time cannot destroy human loveliness entirely, and Lady Hilmerceux had been considered a famous beauty in her day. There were animated moments—at night, or in a dim light—when its charm glowed within her again, like fugitive light in a late sky. Then Ailsa would look at her, breathless, so beautiful was she.

Such moments were rare. Time, which destroys happiness, leaves memory and thought. When tortured by these, Lady Hilmerceux was unapproachable and remote. It was then that her interest in Ailsa became an intermittent thing. She had taken the girl like a flower from the downs, but, having plucked her, she seemed to forget, in her long fits of depression, that she had brought her there.

Flowers—human flowers especially—are sensitive to neglect. Ailsa was grateful, and interested and excited in her new life, but often lonely—far lonelier in Hilmerceux than she had ever been in the cottage on the downs. Solitude she had known there, but she had felt free, and the downs were her friends. Her new home was different. Its emptiness chilled her. For there is a wide difference between the friendly solitude of Nature and the sad loneliness of an old house, thronged with memories. If ghosts walk, they might well have walked in Hilmerceux, a place of mournful history, a relic of a passing age.

It was loneliest at night. From its long dim corridors, and the empty shrouded rooms, came echoes and whispers in the small hours which awakened Ailsa and set her listening, sitting upright in bed, with parted lips and widened eyes. At such moments imagination flamed within her. Sometimes she fancied she heard faint voices sobbing in the dark, rising and falling in a dreary cadence of pain, or seemed to catch the cracked falsetto of a mocking laugh, not jocund, but dismal as the laugh of Sin.

Once she stole from her bed and peeped into the corridor.

But she did not do that again. For her strained ears seemed to take the note of distant singing, and her startled fancy shaped the song into the refrain of the old ballad she had heard in her dream the night her grandmother died. Desperately she turned the key and sought the covert of her bed, white and wan, like a ghost herself. And there was another night when she imagined she heard the sound of a stumbling footfall on the great staircase. . . .

Sometimes she turned on the light and tried to read. But she found that disturbing, too. Propped up by the pillows, book in hand, she would catch reflections of herself in the large looking-glasses almost as startling and disturbing as an apparition of the nether world. The long mirror by the door, the bevelled glass of the wardrobe, the swinging mirrors of the toilet table would show her startled face and her least change of posture only too vividly: six little girls in six white beds, books in their hands, all staring at her with eyes like dark pools. Suppose some sinister, dreadful image were to look over the shoulder of the others, staring back as well? The thought was too awful to contemplate, and Ailsa would switch off the light.

It was better to lie in the dark and think of the downs; of the dew-pond by Chanctonbury, the big holly tree near Stump Bottom, and the blue tits which reared a family of four by the back door of the cottage last spring. And so, with the feeling that the kindly downs were watching over her, she would gradually fall asleep again, not to awake until the morning sun streamed into her window from above the eastern hills.

II

In the morning she would be angry with herself for yielding to these nocturnal fancies, thinking of them as imagination and nerves. She would laugh at and rate herself soundly, and go downstairs with serenity completely restored, for she had the calm temperament of a country

girl. The day found her happy and cheerful when the gracious sunshine flooded the house with light. And she had her daily duties to perform. She read to Lady Hilmerceux from the newspapers after they had breakfasted together in a small light room overlooking the terrace. Then, if the weather was fine, they would stroll over the lawns down to the lake, and feed the carp and the swans.

The scene made a pretty picture, thoroughly English, like a Victorian engraving—Leighton, or something of that sort; Ailsa scattering crumbs from the bridge, and Lady Hilmerceux smiling up at her from the reeds—that is, when she was in the mood to smile. If her humor was propitious Ailsa would chatter to her gaily, imparting all sorts of information about the downs which Lady Hilmerceux had never acquired; where to find plovers' eggs in the spring, for instance. Not to eat, though. Ailsa knew nothing of that. She would have been horrified to know that the mottled eggs which she watched so tenderly were gobbled as a delicacy by epicures in Piccadilly restaurants at two shillings each.

At night she read aloud again, but not from the newspapers. Philosophy, history, and the novels of Thomas Love Peacock—such were Lady Hilmerceux's predilections in literature. Peacock (whom Ailsa didn't understand in the least) seemed rather a curious taste to her.

There were days when Lady Hilmerceux kept to her room, and Ailsa did not see her, because of her desire to be undisturbed. Of the steward Ailsa saw very little at any time. He was early astir about the estate or elsewhere, returning at nightfall, sometimes—but not always—in time for dinner. If he met Ailsa outside, on the estate or downs, he would doff his tweed cap, bow gravely, and ride on. Once, however, the girl happened to look round and saw that he had pulled up his horse to stare after her. Finding himself observed, he turned away instantly and trotted off.

It seemed to Ailsa that he worked very hard. His

days were spent in the open: at the home farm or among the downland flocks, or farther abroad, and the nights found him at his bureau within the house, busy with accounts. He kept the door of his room locked, but Ailsa peeped into it once. It was furnished just like an office, with bureau, typewriter, office files, and pigeon-holes full of folded papers and bills.

Out on the downs Ailsa was always happy, because she loved the open air. But in mid-February the weather turned wet, and for days it was not possible to go out at all; long dreary days when gales brayed across the open country, and the rain beat in torrents against the great windows of the house. It was then that Hilmerceux weighed on her spirits most. At such times it seemed to her to have a soul of its own; the secret morose consciousness of a house brooding over a happier past, when its large rooms were filled with light and laughter, and were not given over to solitude and gloom.

Even the portraits in the long gallery upstairs appeared to whisper strange aspirations to her on these days. "We loved laughter," girlish lips seemed parted to say, "but what laughter is here?" "We liked company and pretty faces," said the men, "but these things have passed away. Why is this—in Hilmerceux?"

And Ailsa could not tell them.

There was one picture in the gallery which interested her differently. This was the portrait of Harry Hilmerceux, the younger brother of my lord, who had gone to Cornwall with her grandfather, and was never seen again. From the massive frame his dark eyes looked down on her with a gay air, wonderfully real.

This face fascinated Ailsa. She would stand long before it, with uplifted innocent eyes, looking at the figure within the frame, trying to imagine it was alive, and just standing there. How handsome he was! The painted face looked at her in a way which kept her quite still, with her lips half-parted and tremulous, and a faint rose-pink color

mounting in her cheeks. Sometimes her own blue eyes would droop before that intent dark gaze. Then, being a sensible English girl, even in maiden dreams, she would rally herself on her foolishness, and move away with a smile.

But the appeal remained. The fascination of the picture grew upon her in a way she could not understand. She gazed at it daily, like a devotee at a shrine. Unaccountable thoughts came to her about the portrait. She even wondered if it was trying to speak. What would those careless lips say to her if they moved?

"My dear young lady. . . ." No, no, he wouldn't begin like that. He would know her, of course. He would say: "My dear Ailsa, here you see me, a mere picture in a frame, alas! Now, if I were only alive"—"Yes, what would you do?" whispered Ailsa, with beating heart, as the dark eyes above her seemed to gleam a little—"I would step down from my frame and—talk to you."

That, of course, was very right and proper, but the answer was really Ailsa's own, and she was always rather breathlessly uncertain about what the portrait would actually do, if it ever breathed with the life with which her imagination quickened it.

It was the eyes which held her. Within them lurked the magnetism and compelling power which drew her thither. They were at once gay and sad, tender and cruel, but they were never indifferent—to her, at least—and always they were bent on her with the same close scrutiny, as though the half-parted lips wished to say something to her but could not. Gradually she came to feel that the portrait was endeavoring to tell her a secret which affected them both. The eyes tried to make her understand, but the lips were unable to utter the words. Once she interpreted the look in the eyes as that of one who was seeking forgiveness.

This indeed was folly. Ailsa, her charming head held slightly backward, and averted from the portrait, told herself that if she could not keep such silly ideas out of

her mind it would be better to keep away from the picture gallery altogether.

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Sometimes, on wet days, Ailsa had tea with the housekeeper, and would sit in her comfortable room, dreamily watching the firelight play upon the walls as she listened to Mrs. Perrins's stories of the old days when Lady Hilmerceux first came to Hilmerceux as a bride, and the great house was full of visitors. The housekeeper's reminiscences of the good old times were not completely discreet, but her natural loquacity had been pent up in solitude too long to be restrained. Perhaps she did not realize how young and innocent Ailsa was. So she raked with gusto among the ashes of the past, and talked. Ailsa listened to her stories with much interest.

III

Spring came early to the downs that year. The cuckoo was heard in mid-April, though he sometimes appears on the downs before then, if the month be warm. By the lake Ailsa heard him calling from the depth of the park. Mounting the bridge above the lake to listen, she was surprised to see a young man approaching the house, making his way up the winding carriage drive. She wondered who the unusual visitor was, and stood, watching him. When he reached the house and was admitted, her interest increased.

Spring peeped at her from the recesses of the park, and beckoned with fairy fingers. It was growing dusk when she recrossed the bridge, her arms full of bluebells and primroses. Glancing upwards towards the terrace, she saw two figures seated near a window, and she wondered if the visitor was still there.

CHAPTER VII

ENCOUNTERS

I

Looking down on the dreaming loveliness of garden and lawns, Harry Vivian wondered with some slight trepidation if the words uttered by his mother twelve years ago were sufficient to warrant his presence there, standing on the terrace of the great house, waiting for some one to receive him. In the long pause which followed his ring he had to resist a temptation to pretend that it had not been heard, and make that an excuse for turning away. No; that was mere weakness. Having come so far, he would see the thing through. He had not followed adventure all his life to show the white feather in the quest now. So he reasoned with himself, with no premonition of the nature of the adventure which was to come to him there.

The heavy door was opened at length by a smart young maid, who appeared rather surprised at the sight of him. When he asked to see Lady Hilmerceux her questioning eyes deepened into doubt, and she murmured something in a soft Sussex drawl about Lady Hilmerceux never receiving visitors.

Harry expressed his regret. "I have come from London specially," he said. "In that case don't you think Lady Hilmerceux might see me?"

She hesitated, looking at him. "Have you come on business, sir?"

"Yes; on private and important business." Then, with a glance at the silver salver she carried. "I have no card. My name is Vivian—Harry Vivian. Will you tell Lady Hilmerceux that?"

She gave a quick glance at his smile, as one looks at a vaguely familiar face.

"I'll ask the steward, sir, if you'll step inside."

She waited for him to enter, then closed the door and disappeared. He looked down the corridor into a dark, grave hall, with a screened entrance and walls panelled in wood. He knew nothing of Tudor craftsmanship, but in a dim way he was conscious of the classic harmony of the interior, and it did not lessen his nervousness.

The maid returned to say that Mr. Radford would see him. He followed her down a few broad stairs leading out of the hall, and then into another and narrower corridor sheathed to the ceiling in oak, and dark with age. Half-way down it she tapped at a door, and opened it for him to enter.

In a large and comfortable room a man sat writing. The roll-top desk, the files of papers, and the business-like furnishings in some way reminded Harry of a shipping office, though he told himself that the comparison was far-fetched. The thick-set man in tweed suit and brown leggings continued writing after his entrance, like a man in an authoritative position who could afford to be discourteous. He wondered who this man was. Power and authority were vested in that broad tweed-covered back—of that he felt sure.

The man in the chair swung round and faced him. Their eyes met, and Harry had the impression that the steward gave a slight start, as at an unexpected sight. But a more lasting impression was that of the seated man's strength: abiding, resolute and grim. Strength looked out from his quiet eyes, and was manifest in every line of his rough-hewn face and dogged chin. It was with this thought in his mind that he heard the other speak.

"May I ask you who you are, and what you want?"

He uttered these words with such a cold and business-like air that Harry concluded he was mistaken in imagining he had seen him start. Indeed, it seemed unlikely—like expecting a granite rock to display emotion. They

faced each other for a moment in silence, Harry seeking for the best words to state his presence there. It was not his intention to explain his visit to this man, for all his air of authority, and the sign of strength in his face.

"I prefer to disclose my business to Lady Hilmerceux," he said.

The other sat back, crossed his legs, and shuffling the papers on his desk, answered slowly:

"Lady Hilmerceux does not receive callers without knowing what brings them here."

He spoke with a quiet but inflexible air, and Harry realized that he must give this man some explanation before he would be permitted to see Lady Hilmerceux. The precaution was perhaps a reasonable one for a woman in her position.

"I have traveled down from London to see Lady Hilmerceux," he replied, "in response to a request made by my mother when she was dying. Her last words to me were: 'Go to Hilmerceux, Sussex.' She died before she could explain the reason to me."

"When was this?" the steward inquired.

"Twelve years ago. Oh, I know it is a long while," he went on, as if answering a doubt in the other's mind. "But I was very young at the time of my mother's death, and left England immediately afterwards. I have been abroad ever since."

The elder man regarded him closely.

"You might have written, though," was his reply.

"I might have written, as you say, but I did not," said Harry. "To speak frankly, I did not give the matter much thought until I happened to be in England again."

The steward's eyes still dwelt on his caller's face with a cold and doubting expression which nettled the young man. He went on impetuously:

"If I cannot see Lady Hilmerceux we need not waste any more time. I shall not explain to you further."

The other spoke impassively.

"I have not yet said you cannot see Lady Hilmerceux.

The reason you give for your visit here is unusual, and I do not quite understand it. To be frank, Mr. Vivian, it's my business to serve Lady Hilmerceux and save her from perhaps needless annoyance. That is why you were shown in here."

He made this answer in a slow and heavy way, like one who might show scant mercy to importunate callers, yet gave each a fair hearing there. Before further words could pass between them, the sound of a quick footfall in the corridor outside reached their ears. The steward's glance traveled towards the door.

"Here is Lady Hilmerceux," he said. "You can tell her your story yourself."

He rose from his chair to go to the door, but it swung open before he could reach it, and a lady swept impetuously in.

"Radford!" she cried. "What is this I hear? One of the maids told Mrs. Perrins a young man named Vivian was asking for me. Where——"

Thus far she got when her glance fell on the steward's visitor. At sight of him she flung her hands upwards before her eyes, as though to ward off some incredible sight. Then her arms dropped limply to her sides again, and the young man saw that her face had gone suddenly white.

"Oh!" she cried, staring at him, and again, "Oh!"

She was like a woman confronting a ghost, but at the same time she devoured him with her eyes. She faltered out——

"Harry, Harry! Can it be——"

"Harry is my name," replied the young man, in great astonishment at this scene, "Harry Vivian."

"Tell me who you are?" she went on rapidly. "Where do you come from?"

He tried to answer her, but her impatience outran his speech.

"Tell me quickly!" she said passionately, still gazing at him with the same white face.

"Lady Hilmerceux—" began Radford, but she waved him back.

"No, no, Radford! Let me speak. This is something I must understand for myself." She turned again to the visitor, in a sort of agony of fear. "Why cannot you answer me? I want to know whose son you are, and who sent you here?"

"I have told you my name," said Harry. "The reason which brings me here is more difficult to explain. My mother mentioned Hilmerceux to me when she was dying, and asked me to come. Beyond that I know nothing."

"Your mother?" she said, still in the same disorder of mind. "Who is your mother, and when did she die?"

"I have already said that my mother died twelve years ago," he replied, looking uncomfortably towards the steward. "No doubt I should have come before, but——"

"Where were you born?" she cried out, but now with the dawn of comprehension in her eyes.

"At Saint-Just," he said, "Saint-Just, a small town in the south of France."

At this reply she drew a long breath, as though some spell was lifted from her.

"Then you must be George Vivian's son!" She looked towards the steward as if many feelings were struggling in her soul. "Radford, how did the resemblance strike you? When I came in and saw him beside you my heart went cold within me, like ice, though I don't know whether with joy or fear. I thought it was he—the other Harry—who went away and never came back again. I see it was foolish of me—now that it has been made plain—but, ah! the resemblance is too terribly vivid. He is the same—actually. He has his glance—his eyes. He is so wonderfully like him that it gives me both grief and joy to see him standing here."

She was not looking at him just then, but Harry's gaze remained fixed on this tall lady with the dark hair and eyes, whose sweet, vibrant voice fell on his ears like the mellow sound of some rare musical instrument. She

was a type of womanhood he had never seen before; thoroughbred, supple and flashing as a Toledo blade, regal in bearing like a queen. She was speaking rather haughtily to the steward now, wanting to know why she had not heard of this visitor at once. Radford, with a slow deliberation which contrasted oddly with the fire, made shift to explain.

"I was questioning the young man about his business," he said, in his dogged way. "Did I go against your will and let every chance caller in to see you, there'd be small room for me here."

"But the resemblance!" she exclaimed. "Did you not see it?"

"It may be plain for you to see," he soberly rejoined, "but that was before my time here."

"I know," she sharply replied. "No one remembers him like I do. But there is the portrait in the long gallery upstairs. You've seen that, haven't you? Man, where were your eyes? As if questions were necessary then! The likeness between the two is beyond dispute! Oh, it is wonderful—too wonderful, indeed! Ah, life can be very cruel. But it is not for me to speak so now. I should rather thank God——"

She broke off abruptly, the color coming and going in her cheeks. The steward watched her carefully, but uttered no sound. Harry looked from one to the other, making nothing of this conversation beyond a vague comprehension from her words that he resembled some other Harry who had disappeared long ago, and whose portrait hung in the long gallery upstairs. Meanwhile Lady Hilmerceux went on speaking to the steward again, but in milder tone.

"Of course you were only doing your duty. I do not doubt that. Perhaps I spoke too hastily just now." She swept round to the young man again, looking on him now with a smile. "Your appearance upset me a little," she said. "You have a face which recalls the past—rather too vividly perhaps. Or it may be that one

leading a quiet life, as I do, is easily startled. But that is over now. Come with me upstairs. I want you to tell me all about yourself, and how you came to Hilmerceux.”

She made him a sign to go with her, and with a somewhat distracted obedience he followed her from the room.

II

The room to which she took him looked out on a terrace and sloping lawn. It was furnished with modern daintiness and grace, but instinctively he realized that the beauty of the interior owed much to a structure and coloring enriched by the hand of time. Beneath modern elegance a hallowed antiquity austereley gleamed. She sat in a low chair by the window, and pointed to another, piled with silk cushions, beside her. When he had seated himself she requested him to tell her all he could.

“Everything about yourself,” she said. “Even now I have the feeling that you are the ghost of one who went away forty years ago, and was drowned. To look at you gives me the strange idea that Time has reversed his glass—turned it upside down.” She was silent for a moment, then went on: “But I must not talk like this. Come now, let me have the reality. Tell me your story.”

“What am I to tell you?” he nervously asked.

“All you can remember about your parents and your own life,” was her quick answer.

“My life doesn’t amount to very much.” He sought in vain to speak lightly, vexed to find himself so ill at ease with this lady in her perfumed nest. “I have been at sea for a good number of years——”

“I think it will be best for you to go back some time before then,” she interposed. “It is your childhood in France which interests me most. But first of all I want to know what brought you here to-day.”

Greatly perplexed, the young man tried to tell her what

she wished to know. He related briefly the history of his mother's visit to England twelve years before, and the last words she had uttered to him in the London nursing home. Lady Hilmerceux heard him silently, but he gathered somehow that her quiescence and quietude covered a hidden anxiety and a shade of fear. When he had finished her eyes sought his with an inexplicable and sad glance.

"You poor boy!" she murmured. "But tell me," she went on, after a pause, "why did not you come to me before? Why did you allow all these years to go by?"

He tried, hesitatingly, to explain his reasons. He was only twelve years old at the time, and did not know how to set about this unknown journey to Hilmerceux. England—London—was a foreign land to him then, and his knowledge of the English tongue was very small.

"So I went to sea instead," he said with a smile.

"And did you never once think of writing from abroad?" she said in some surprise.

He was silent about that, not wishing her to know that he had never attached much importance to his mother's request because of her miserable failing. That was a shameful secret he wished to keep to himself. Lady Hilmerceux perceived his hesitation and spoke again.

"We need not think about that now. You have come to me at last, and that is the great thing. It was supposed you were dead too, but I never really thought that. I always had a kind of hope that we would hear of you some day. I have prayed to God and he has at last heard my prayer. And now, tell me about Saint-Just and your father."

She spoke of his father and Saint-Just as though she shared his interest in both, and again he wondered when the mystery of this conversation was to be made clear to him. His ignorance of how these things concerned her imposed on him an increasing strain, as if he sat blindfolded, while she could see. But he told her all he could. She was silent for a while.

"Sometime after your father's death, your mother paid a visit to London, where she died," she said at length.

"Yes," he replied.

"And she was only in England a week when she was taken ill?" she continued.

"Yes," he said, with a slight flush. "I would rather not speak of it, if you do not mind."

"I understand," she answered gravely.

The gentle implication of her tone made him feel that she did indeed understand far more than he had supposed. Her next words surprised him still more.

"Did your father ever speak to you of Hilmerceux—or me?"

"Never!" Astonishment lent an emphasis to the word which brought a faint smile to her lips, followed by a sigh.

"He kept his word—like an English gentleman." She breathed these words almost to herself, then said:

"I understand you were the only child?"

"Yes," he answered.

Another silence fell. He waited expectantly for her to break it, but she seemed to have no further questions to put. In the darkling light her face looked like a mask of fine ivory, and her eyes were veiled in brooding thought. Through the window he looked on the garden; and trees, faintly green. Beyond, in the distance, was an old gray bridge, spanning a lake. He saw a young girl cross it, then stand still to watch the swans sailing by the water's brink. A last ray of sunlight set this picture in a green-gold frame. The gleam vanished, and the girl turned away.

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"And now—what next?"

The sweet voice in the dim room recalled his wandering senses. He looked from the window towards Lady Hilmerceux. Her head was still bent, as if in thought. The next moment she looked up with a practical air, like one who has reached a decision.

"Did you bring any luggage with you?"

The question might have caused him amusement at another time. A second mate of a cargo boat does not carry luggage around the world. His sea chest on the *Avenel* held all his possessions, except those in the suit-case he had left at the hotel near the station, intending to stay there for the night. He told Lady Hilmerceux this.

"I will send for it at once, then," she said. "For of course you must stay here."

"Stay here?" he stammered, wondering if this was a dream.

"Yes," she said. "You must have the Gray Room. It is always ready and aired. You'll find linen in the drawers if you need it—collars and shirts and ties which have never been worn. They belonged to your namesake and will fit you, I think." She gave him a wan smile. "There are unworn suits there too. And in the morning Mr. Lemartine will be here—I shall send for him at once. He is the family lawyer. He will see you and explain all this to you."

He could find no word at first to say to this, for it was all beyond him, and he did not understand in the least. Then he plucked up a sentence or two to thank her.

"You are very kind," he said, "but . . . I have to return to my ship. My leave is up to-morrow."

"Your ship!" she retorted impatiently. "What ship? Do you own a ship?"

He sought to explain the use of the word sanctioned by the immemorial custom of the sea, but she waved him into silence with a peremptory hand.

"The ship must sail without you," she said quickly. "You cannot go back. It is quite absurd to talk of ships now. You must stay here."

She spoke with a dominance which brooked no denial. He looked at her uncertainly.

"Why do you wish me to stay?" he asked.

"Because your father belonged to this house," she rejoined; "because we searched for you for years."

"Perhaps there is some mistake," he began, in secret surprise, but she interrupted him sharply.

"There is no mistake," she said. "But I do wish you had found me before. Not that it mattered much. Had it not been for the War—" She broke off quickly, and added in a different voice, "Did your mother ever speak to you of your father's people?"

"No," he said.

"Just enough to send you to Hilmerceux, after all these years," were her next words. She mused for a moment or two. "She was on her way here, though, when she died. Well, it would have been worse than useless, at that time. But we will not discuss your mother. It may be best that it has happened so; yes, perhaps it is just as well."

He looked at her in a kind of wonder.

"You forget I am still in the dark about what you mean," he said.

"Ah, as that is so, the explanation must stand over until the morning," she said with a quick glance, "until Mr. Lemartine arrives. There is much for you to know, and there are matters which it would be painful for me to tell you. Yes! We will wait for Lemartine. It will be much better if everything is left to him. Your future is here, and he will know exactly what to do."

The magic of her smile rested on him, and he felt that he could do nothing but let her have her way. She put out her hand and touched the bell.

"You would like to go to your room and rest after your journey down," she said. "Dinner is at eight."

She told the maid who appeared to show Mr. Vivian to the Gray Room, and she gave the young man another smile as he left her.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST EVENING

I

Not until the girl's footsteps had died away in the stillness of the corridor outside did the young man look around him at the room to which she had brought him. It looked like the sleeping apartment of men of ancient race. The heavy large furniture, the gray walls, the deep gray carpet on which he stood, all seemed charged with the lingering and wistful atmosphere of the past. A faint odor of lavender and camphor was in the air, suggestive of clothes laid carefully away. There was no attempt at modern elegance here. The room was the stolid expression of the muffled comfort of a former generation. But to Harry Vivian it appeared in another and more startling guise. He had the disconcerted feeling of one confronted with a forgotten yet not unfamiliar scene. The large room, long gray curtains, age-dark pictures, deeply framed, the antique dressing-table with an oval mirror set in silver gilt: these were articles which touched his imagination like elusive vague landmarks of some early dream.

He summoned up a rueful smile and endeavored to shake the sensation off.

"I must pull myself together," he murmured aloud. "This bewildering day has been a bit too much for me."

He walked across the room to the window, and there he stood for a while looking out. There was nothing in that fair scene which touched a haunting chord. Garden, lawn and lake; the park, and the lifting downs—this soft vista of an English landscape met his eyes as the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He gazed at length over it, watching the light fade, and the dove-gray tones of twilight.

deepen and dissolve in the shadows of the coming night.

A light knock on the door aroused him. He opened it. A maid stood outside, a can of hot water in her hand. She spoke demurely.

"If you care for a hot bath after your journey, sir, you will find the bathroom at the end of the corridor."

"Thank you," said Harry.

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After a bath he felt refreshed, and returned to the Gray Room to rest for a while, thinking over this strange day. And it was only the beginning of the adventure. Lady Hilmerceux had said, "Your future lies here." He had no idea what she meant, and just then he did not try to think. It was all too puzzling for him to understand, and it was better to wait for the morning, when Mr. Lemartine would bring light. Meantime there was the evening to be got through, and he had to spur his courage up for the dinner, which now loomed before him as something in the nature of an ordeal. He pictured a shadowed high room with gleaming floor, a table beneath screened lights, Lady Hilmerceux and himself seated there, servants and a solemn butler in attendance. Here was adventure and to spare for youth. Romance, iridescent wings folded, stood meekly, captive to his hand, but her bright eyes had an enigmatic look. It would not be wise to take to prophecy over all this.

A fire had been lit in the deep fireplace while he was in the bathroom. The flames leapt and sparkled, throwing gleams on the dark furniture and high gray walls. His suitcase had been brought up, and the contents were lying out. Beside his own things were fine linen shirts, collars and ties of delicate quality, all unworn. On the antique dressing-table a case of razors had been placed. He took one from the blue velvet interior and read the initials "H. H." in silver on the white. The hair-brushes set out for his use bore the same monogram on ivory backs.

He supposed these things belonged to the Hilmerceux he was said to resemble. Beside the dressing-table one of the mahogany tallboys had been opened, and some of the drawers pulled partly out. Looking in them, he saw they were stocked with masculine clothes, most carefully preserved. That discovery prompted him to switch on the light and examine his blue suit with an anxious eye. It had been made for him at Calcutta, when the *Avenel* had gone to that port to load jute. A good suit at the time, it had undoubtedly faded in color since, and the braid of one cuff was frayed. It would have to do for dinner, and no doubt his hostess would understand.

He sat down again in a chair by the fire and fell into thought. It was strange to be there, and a little eerie, too, in this gray room, where the other had sat, in his easy chair, looking into the fire, as no doubt the dead man had often done in the past. What would his namesake say, if he could look in just then, and see him sitting there, surrounded by his most intimate things, which apparently had been kept just as he left them when he went away.

And so, sitting and thinking, with the firelight playing on his face, the time passed until the mellow note of a gong in the silence summoned the young man to the dining-room downstairs.

II

They dined in an apartment not unlike the one of his fancy, but larger, with the look of a room not in common use. Its space was impressive. There were only the two of them, but he had the odd sensation of a third presence there. The lofty panelled walls, the pictures in deep frames, the long slits of windows which shut out the light, marked the encompassing presence of the great dark house about them, which seemed to preside over the meal. The idea haunted him like a fantasy, and made him feel rather uncomfortable. Even his hostess, seated opposite him in shimmering black and

silver, seemed at times to be part of the illusion, and to heighten the sense of unreality which possessed him. He found himself wondering if he was actually at Hilmerceux, dining with its mistress alone, and if he would not presently find himself back again in the teakwood saloon of the *Avenel*, with red-faced Captain McQuade at the head of the table, and Mr. Hargle, the Scots engineer with a passion for theological discussion, sitting opposite, eating ravenously with his knife and asserting the existence of a personal God.

After dinner they took their coffee in a smaller room off the dining-room, a cosy recess which had remained cheerful in spite of the centuries it had seen pass. It was almost circular in shape, hung with tapestries of hunting scenes, with lights beneath colored shades falling in glowing pools on the dark furniture and gleaming floor. Here they sat comfortably. Harry smoked a cigarette from a silver box, and felt his spirits rise and his sense of reality return in this small pleasant place. He smoked in silence at first. His companion's face was pensive in the clear light, her eyes fixed on the hunting screen, though she did not see the figures of horsemen and deer depicted there. Her delicate features were set in dreaming reverie. At length she roused herself, and, turning to her young guest, once more asked him to tell her about his life as a child.

Again Harry did his best to satisfy her wish, though, as he said, he had already told her almost all he could recall of those early days. She knew of the first eight years in the old walled town in France, and of the wandering years afterwards on the Mediterranean shore. Lady Hilmerceux nodded, and said it was about his father she would like him to speak; that was the theme which held her interest most. He sought to gratify it, but there was very little he could recall. His clearest recollection was one of his father sitting beside his cot reading, when his son was supposed to be asleep. But he was awake, looking through lowered lids at the book

in his father's hand, watching the dark, intent face in the glow of the shaded lamp. The reminiscence pleased Lady Hilmerceux.

"Yes; your father was dark," she said thoughtfully. "You resemble him somewhat, but you take after his father—oh! very much more." Again she paused and gave him a curious look. "It was very English of you, in spite of your French upbringing, to go away to sea. When did you first think of it? During the four years you spent by the Mediterranean after your father's death?"

"Oh, no; not then," he replied with a smile. "In fact, I almost forgot how to speak English there."

"And you like your life as a sailor?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I am glad I followed the sea as a profession."

"It is strange to think of you spending so many years afloat," she said musingly. "No member of this house has ever been a sailor. The Hilmerceux are Sussex folk, and Sussex blood rarely roams. You must tell me about your seafaring career some day."

They talked for a while longer. Seeking for a subject to interest her, he told her of the Allinghams, and how it was through them he had first heard of Hilmerceux and its mistress. When the story was finished she rose, saying that she felt tired after this exciting day and would now go upstairs. They would find much time for further talks together, she said, with the air of one planning the future. She suggested that he might like to go to the billiard-room for an hour or so. "I want you to feel at home," she said, as she wished him good night.

III

He sat there smoking a little while longer, turning over their conversation in his mind. Then he left the tapestried room slowly, wondering how he was to spend the remainder of the evening in this unfamiliar place. Outside

in the corridor he saw the butler. Harry beckoned to him. "Where is the billiard-room?" he inquired.

"I will take you, sir."

The butler led the way down a few stairs and along the corridor which led past the steward's room. A light gleamed from beneath the door, and Harry wondered if the steward was at work within. He pictured him at his bureau, conning accounts, his stern eye roving from the bottom of one line of figures to the top of the next. The butler went past this door along the corridor, and opened another door at the extreme end. He switched on the light by the entrance, and a large, comfortable billiard-room was disclosed. The butler was withdrawing after placing the balls on the table when the young man stopped him with a question.

"I suppose it is some time since this table was played upon."

"Why, yes, sir, it is," said the butler, considering, with the air of a man counting back. "It must be a good forty years."

"A long time!" said Harry. "Were you here then?"

A faint flicker of a smile touched the other's face.

"I have been here over fifty years sir."

Fifty years! The young man looked at the old one in silence. The butler was probably well over seventy, but his placid and pink-cheeked face showed little sign of age. Shadows of darker texture lingered in the silver of his hair, and his figure was sturdy and upright, as if defying time, like a deep-rooted tree. He had spent half a century in this house of ancient tradition, doing the same thing day after day, striking his roots deeper and deeper into the same spot of soil, exactly like a tree. A strange hermitical sort of life!

The butler lingered a moment, but it appeared the visitor had nothing more to say, so he noiselessly withdrew. He was back a moment or two later, bearing whisky and cigars on a tray. Carefully he arranged these refreshments on a small table in a corner, and said:

"Is there anything else you require, sir?"

Harry shook his head with a smile.

"Nothing else, thank you."

.

After striking a ball or two at random, the young man replaced his cue in the rack. The place seemed more suitable for sober reflection than the flippant click of billiard-balls. It was very still and remote, with a deep curtained window at the far end of the room which no doubt looked out on the darkness of the downs. But he had no wish to lift the heavy curtain and see. Instead he walked round the room, looking at the pictures on the walls.

He inspected them indiscriminately. There were etchings of the downs, ancient racing prints, and large framed photographs of hunting groups, interspersed with glassed trophies of the chase, hung in clusters here and there. The pictures and prints had a faded look, and the photographs gave the impression of having been taken a long time ago. Looking at them now, the young man wondered how many of those dashing figures photographed on horseback amid rural scenes were alive to-day. And then with a shock of surprise he found himself gazing on a picture he had seen long years before.

It was one of the large photographs, which showed a girl and a man on horseback side by side, with a knot of hounds clustered in the background by a ragged old oak. The picture was blurred by time, the two human faces indistinct, but the oak and hounds and the slender proud figure of the girl in her riding habit were familiar enough in Harry's mind. His memory stretched backward across the years to Saint-Just, and a night when his father had turned over the pages of an old portfolio of pictures to amuse a languid small boy who had been sick with measles. He remembered how his father had shown him the prints, one by one, telling him they were pictures of England. When he reached this picture he had looked on it for a long time, then sighed, and locked the portfolio away.

Harry kept his eyes on the photograph, thinking of that distant night. It all came back to him so clearly just then, recalled to his mind in this way. What was a duplicate of the same scene doing on the walls of this lonely old house in the heart of the Sussex downs? To look on it thus was very strange. He went closer to the picture, examining it more intently. Something had been written in a corner of the picture, but the ink had almost faded away. There was a partly obliterated date, and the words, "Killed near Horseshoe Clump." How long ago was that, and how did it affect his father, that he should have sighed over the photograph that night in Saint-Just, fifteen years before? He wondered if he would ever know.

He sat down beneath the picture, and fell into a train of thought. But it led him nowhere. The quiet old room seemed to challenge him to discover anything of these secret memories of the past. Presently his mind drifted to other things. The intense stillness was soothing after a tiring and exciting day. In that great house which encompassed him he could not hear the faintest sound. Gradually a sort of dreaminess overtook him, and was carrying him off to slumber, when he was brought back to wakefulness by the striking of a distant clock. He listened, counting the slow strokes as they vibrated from upstairs. Eleven! Then it was high time he went to bed.

Rising to his feet, he switched off the light and left the room. As he passed back along the corridor there was no light now showing beneath the door of the steward's room.

In the utter stillness he went up the short staircase without a light. In the corridor the outline of the great staircase was visible in the gloom, rising imposingly above his head. Looking about him, he wondered where the electric switch was placed. As he did so he perceived a light falling brightly into the corridor from an open door, not far away. He went forward to its brilliance, and glanced in.

CHAPTER IX

THE PORTRAIT IN THE GALLERY

I

He found himself gazing into a long, high room lined with books, with a brass-railed upper gallery reached by a few narrow stairs, and recesses for reading on the lower floor between the shining brass trellis of the book-shelves. Writing-tables were here and there, with some rare bronzes and bowls, and the light he had seen came from a shaded swinging globe which diffused a soft radiance through the library from end to end. His eye took in these things as he walked into the room. And then another sight arrested him: a girl in one of the alcoves, reading a book. She saw him, and jumped up with a startled look.

"Oh, I am sorry if I frightened you," he said, going forward.

"You did—rather," she answered, with a faint smile.

She stood there with shining eyes and parted lips. For the moment she thought her unknown hero had come to her from the picture upstairs. "Is it you—really and truly you?" But the greeting of her heart died unspoken on her lips as common sense returned.

"I thought at first that you were the——"

She stopped with a blush, because she could not confide in this stranger the wild fancy of her secret dream. Even now, she could hardly believe her eyes.

He met her look with a smile.

"You thought I was the portrait come to life. Is that what you were going to say?"

She nodded.

"You've heard about it, then?"

"Yes," he replied, "though I haven't seen it yet."

"You're ever so like it," she said, beginning to recover herself. "You must see it."

It seemed to him that she regarded the portrait as a living thing and he as its likeness. The quaint fancy charmed him, but the girl charmed him more. She was like a beautiful picture herself. His eyes lingered on the pure oval of her face, crowned with soft fair hair. In some intangible way she stirred a forgotten memory, as if he had seen her before. Their glances met and she looked away.

"I don't happen to be the picture," he said gravely. "I am still alive. I only came here to-day."

"I know," she rejoined with vivacity. "I saw you from the lake—going up the drive. Are you a relation of Lady Hilmerceux's?"

"I'm not sure," was his laughing response. "My name is Vivian—Harry Vivian. I'm a stranger to Lady Hilmerceux. At least, I was when I arrived to-day. And may I ask who you are?"

"I am Ailsa Rose."

Ailsa Rose! A very pretty name, he decided to himself. Then asked:

"Are you a relation of Lady Hilmerceux?"

She shook her head.

"I? Oh, no! I am Lady Hilmerceux's companion."

"Lady Hilmerceux's companion." He repeated her answer to himself, wondering where the mistress of the household had managed to find such a sweet girl to be with her in this great lonely house. Lady Hilmerceux evidently had a weakness for youth, he thought, and was ungrateful enough to wonder if she renewed her own by absorbing the sweetness of this palpitating young thing.

"How long have you been here?" he inquired.

"Three months," she said; then added, "Lady Hilmerceux just lets me live here. She is very kind and good to me."

Small wonder to that, the young man thought, trying to catch a glimpse of her eyes again. The girl and the

situation and the hour intrigued him. He moved a step nearer, noting the slim whiteness of her hand against the dark dressing-gown she was wearing.

"You were not at dinner to-night," he said. "Do you not dine with Lady Hilmerceux?"

"Usually, but I didn't to-night," she answered. "You see, you were here, and Lady Hilmerceux wanted to talk to you alone. I dined with Mrs. Perrins, the housekeeper."

"And do you come here every night to read?" he asked, glancing round the alcove at the books.

"Not always. I came to-night for a book to take to my room. Sometimes I cannot sleep, and then I like to read."

She spoke quite simply, like a child, and she seemed little more than a child at that moment, standing there in her dressing-gown, her hair falling loose. He looked about the alcove, and his eyes rested absently on the books in their deep shelves, mounting in multiplied tiers above their heads. His glance returned to the table, and fell on the open book she had been reading there. He picked it up and turned the leaves. It was a Gadshill edition, in calf, of "Bleak House."

"Dickens. . . ." he murmured. "I read him at sea. My father used to read him to me before that, but I was too young to understand him then. What a great library this is! Has anyone ever read all these books?"

"I don't know," she said. "Nobody uses the library now except me. Lady Hilmerceux told me to do so, and to take whatever books I liked, but there are a lot of big books here not a bit interesting—I looked into them to see. There's a 'History of Sussex,' in nearly twenty volumes, so heavy that they can hardly be lifted down—not that I wanted to."

"It sounds dry—especially in heavy volumes," he agreed. A lettered gilt binding on an adjacent shelf caught his eye. "History of Hilmerceux," he read aloud. "Quite a lot of it too. I suppose you haven't attempted that?"

"Oh, yes, I have," she returned demurely. "It is very

interesting—far more interesting than a story. Hilmerceux has had such a wonderful history, just like a——”

“A romance?” he interposed, recalling Lady Hilmerceux’s words.

“A romance is happy, isn’t it?” hesitatingly. “This is sad as well.” After a moment’s silence she picked up her book from the table. “I must go upstairs now.”

“I am going upstairs too.”

They went to the door. She switched off the light in the library and turned it on in the corridor. Her face showed clear in the brighter rays. In silence, they reached the staircase, rising imposingly into the darkness above, and mounted it in silence. At the landing she switched on another light. “My room is in the east wing,” she said. “I will leave you here. Good ni——” She broke off suddenly, looking down a dim corridor on her right with a face of startled concern. “A light,” she whispered hurriedly—“a light in the picture gallery. I wonder who is there?”

It was the place more than the event which disturbed her: a light glimmering unexpectedly in the room of her daily dreams. His quick intuition helped him to realize that. He felt that this unknown girl was both fearless and innocent, and a stranger to ordinary feminine nerves. He smiled reassuringly into her widening eyes, and said in a low tone:

“Perhaps one of the servants has forgotten to turn it off. Shall I go and see?”

“I will come with you,” she replied.

II

They walked down the corridor to the picture gallery. The door was ajar, and Harry pushed it open. Within they were confronted by a long empty room with rows of pictures looking sadly down from gloomy walls, and armored figures in shadowy corners, faintly illumined by a solitary candle in a silver candlestick which stood on a

small table in the center of the apartment. Ailsa, with the observant eye of her sex for such details, knew that the table had been brought from another part of the room and placed where the candle would throw light upon the face of her thoughts. She turned to Harry and murmured:

"The candle is in front of the picture which is so like you."

"Indeed?" he rejoined. "Then let us look at it, now we are here. I am quite anxious to see it, after all I have heard about it."

"I'll switch on the light," she said.

She hastened to do so, and they went to where the portrait was hung. Harry's first glance at it wrung from him an involuntary exclamation of surprise. For the face which looked from the canvas at him appeared to be his own.

Ailsa stood by silently, glancing from the portrait to Harry with wide questioning eyes. It was wonderful, she thought, to see them both thus, face to face. In her excitement she clasped his arm, as if she wished to assure herself by that gentle pressure that he was a living presence of flesh and blood, and not merely some shadowy illusion, a counterpart of the picture above, stepped down from its frame.

"You see?" she breathed. "Now you can understand."

"Oh, this is most interesting," he said, with rather a wry smile.

They stood for some minutes without speaking before the gilt frame, wrapped in contemplation of the picture within. Harry regarded it almost furtively, with the mingled fascination and apprehension of one confronting the bizarre. He could not rid himself of the feeling that this was actually himself: this portrait of a young man whose dark eyes seemed to greet his surprise with a cynical glance. The frame held more than a mere likeness. The artist had caught the living personality of the original by some magic of art. A bold and reckless spirit looked down from the frame—looked down with a baffling smile.

Harry Vivian was held captive by that mocking yet beautiful smile. It was strange to stand there, confronted by his own speaking likeness, apparently, and yet one with a depth of evil in the eyes which he had never supposed to exist in his own. What did it mean? Gazing into the picture, he tried to envisage it. The portrait showed a fine gentleman with a matchless air, doubtless some gallant and rake of his day, and a far more dashing blade than he would ever be; he, Harry Vivian, who was neither fine gentleman nor gallant, but merely a humble follower of the sea. And yet the likeness was there. It was such a startling resemblance that it had given him—and still gave him—an uncomfortable thrill. So unmistakably there that three people in the house—Lady Hilmerceux, her steward (as he believed), and the girl beside him—had seen it and been struck with it instantly. Again he asked himself what the meaning could possibly be, staring hard as he did so at the mocking, painted face, scanning each feature in turn: the dark eyes, eager yet weary, the dark oval contour of the face, the white hand, sharply upflung, as though beckoned from the frame for him to come closer and listen to some secret the portrait wished to impart.

The candle in its silver stand flickered near the frame. Observing it, he wondered who had placed it there. Lady Hilmerceux, he supposed. He thought now with secret repugnance of that story she had told him of the past. What kind of a woman was this, living alone with memories of her dead, who sought to make them rise again before her eyes? Why should she strive to put back the clock of the years? It was like witchcraft. Once more he vainly strove for the meaning of it all.

As these thoughts flitted through his mind he glanced at the girl standing by his side. She had been absorbed, like himself. She turned to him now.

"Isn't it strange?" she said, in a voice which sounded awed. "It might be you."

"I don't think I'm quite so like it as that," he rejoined, with a slight bitterness which escaped her. "There is a difference—a difference which I cannot explain to you, if you cannot see it for yourself. But it is there, nevertheless."

Her face showed him that she did not understand, and it rather irritated him to think that the difference between him and the portrait was not so apparent in other eyes as in his own. It was a humiliating reflection, yet one, as he considered it, not wholly without compensations. That idea banished his irritation. He was about to speak, when again the striking of the clock he had heard downstairs broke with startling distinctness into the current of his thoughts. But this time it was his companion who counted the strokes.

"Twelve! Oh, how late! I must go."

She spoke with a hurried nervousness, as if the mechanical reminder of the hour recalled her to the ordinances of a conventional world where young girls are not permitted to wander in dim rooms at midnight, looking at pictures with strange young men. Blushing and trembling, she drew a little away from him, becoming, on the instant, the shy and burning virgin, conscious of scanty attire beneath her dressing-gown, of disordered hair, and indecorous bare feet in bedroom slippers.

"I must go," she murmured again. "Lady Hilmerceux would be angry if she found me here, like this, with you."

At that moment he had the singular feeling that they were actually seen and watched by a pair of eyes which were not merely painted ones. So vivid was the impression that he swung on his heel sharply, searching the dim recesses of the gallery with inquisitive gaze. But he could see nothing. His impulsive action increased her discomposure.

"Why did you look round?" she asked quickly. "Did you see or hear anything?"

"No, no," he said, with a reassuring smile. "It was merely fancy."

She looked at him doubtfully, then her face changed, and she moved closer to him.

"Oh," she said rather fearfully, "I thought I heard a step—a step going downstairs."

They listened intently, but no sound broke the silence of the house.

"Perhaps it was my fancy too," she said, with rather a tremulous smile. "Lady Hilmerceux says this is a house of illusions."

A house of illusions! It was an apt comparison, he thought. For looking down at her that moment, he again had the haunting intangible sensation that he had seen her face somewhere before. It was impossible, he knew. The impression passed instantly, and was followed by a feeling of compunction for having kept her there. The door of the gallery had been left partly open, and they might have been seen by anyone standing in the darkness outside. But why should any unseen person watch them? Had they been watched at all? These questions had to be left unanswered.

"We will go now," he said gently. "I am sorry to have kept you so long."

They passed out of the gallery in silence. In the corridor she turned to leave him, with a softly uttered "Good night."

"Good night," he replied in the same tone. "Thank you for showing me the picture."

She went down the corridor, quickly vanishing from his view. He waited for a moment, then turned off the corridor light and walked quietly to the head of the stairs. Here he stood, looking down. The ground floor was wrapped in darkness, in which he caught the gleam of the effigy in armor at the foot of the stairs. But there was no light or sound. The house was dark and silent, above and below stairs. It had been fancy, then. His

faint smile in the gloom acknowledged it. . . . And yet he had felt so sure!

He turned away from the landing into the corridor on his right, making his way towards his bedroom in the dark. A ray of moonlight from some invisible window guided him, pointing, like a long white finger, to the open door.

CHAPTER X

MR. LEMARTINE AND THE LAW

I

The following morning he had breakfast alone in a small octagonal room, and the butler brought him London newspapers before he had quite finished the meal. But his thoughts preoccupied him, and he left them unopened. Outside the garden nodded brightly in the soft breeze, and the lake sparkled in the distance like a mirror set in reeds. Through the long open window he stepped out.

Slowly he walked the spaces of the garden until he reached a low seat looking southward over the downs, sparkling gloriously upward in the morning sun to Chanctonbury, where a white cloud rested on the summit of dark trees. But the gentle beauty of the Sussex landscape was unfolded to indifferent eyes. His thoughts centered on Hilmerceux, from that part of the garden partly screened from view by trees. In the clear high light the old Tudor house bulked dark and grim. A row of upper windows displayed shutters, like lowered lids, as if the place was dead. Yet it had life after nightfall—like a ghost. He recalled the girl who had sped from the gallery at midnight, and he wondered if the shuttered windows were in the east wing, where her room was. How strange to find a young girl like her in such lonely surroundings! But it was all strange, if it came to that: the great old house, of dark and melancholy beauty of the past, where Lady Hilmerceux and this girl lived alone, with a grim-faced steward and a few servants. A lonely life. No wonder the girl had spoken of Hilmerceux as a house of illusions. It revealed itself in that aspect now;

mediæval and gray, the haunt of memory and mouldering dreams. A strange reluctance came over him as he remembered Lady Hilmerceux's words: "Your future is here."

The figure of Peters, the butler, appeared in the distance, making towards him by flagged garden paths. He reached the seat, and bowed.

"Mr. Lemartine has just arrived, sir. Her ladyship would be glad if you would join them in the library."

"How did Mr. Lemartine come?"

"By the early train, sir. The car met him at Worthing station."

Harry rose from the seat with a slight quickening of nerves, surprised at Mr. Lemartine's quick appearance. He followed the butler back to the house, and down the long corridor to the library. As they neared it the sound of voices floated through the partly open door, perfectly audible in the perfect quiet and stillness there. Lady Hilmerceux was speaking, and he overheard her say:

"Education . . . no; what can you expect? He's been at sea since his mother died, poor boy! But what does that matter, now he's here? He has Harry's charm and manner, and I can soon achieve the rest. Oh, God has intervened, Lemartine, before it was too late. Who shall say there is no answer to prayer?"

"Well, we shall see," responded a male voice.

The young man entered the library quickly. It was the room in which he had seen Ailsa the night before. In it Lady Hilmerceux was talking with an elderly man whose appearance smacked of the law. She looked round at the sound of the opening door.

"Now, Lemartine," she cried, "you see for yourself!"

The man of legal aspect turned his head towards Harry, and stared.

"Why, yes, I can mark a resemblance," he said, speaking slowly, like one accustomed to weighing his words.

"A great resemblance!" said Lady Hilmerceux emphatically. "He lives again in him, as he stands there."

She went forward, and took the young man by the arm. "This is Mr. Lemartine, Harry," she said.

Mr. Lemartine looked at the young man with a quick sharpness, and bowed. He was tall and thin, clean-shaven, with keen dark eyes in a sallow face, beneath bushy gray eyebrows. Harry was conscious of the penetrating scrutiny of his glance, but he could also see that beneath his coolness he was plainly surprised. Lady Hilmerceux glanced at them both.

"I have been explaining to Mr. Lemartine how you came to me, Harry," she said, "and now I will leave you together."

II

When the door closed behind Lady Hilmerceux Harry turned to his companion, and waited for him to speak. But the lawyer seemed in no hurry to begin. He stood in the center of the room, eyeing the young man with the same penetrating air. For some moments no words passed. Then, with a sudden change of manner, he indicated a chair.

"Let us be seated, Mr. Vivian, if you please. I must first ask you a few questions."

"Certainly," said Harry, sitting down; "go ahead."

"First," said the other, taking a chair himself, "where were you born?"

"In the mountain village of Saint-Just, in the south of France."

"How old were you when your father died?"

"Eight—going on for nine."

"And where was your father buried?"

"In the cemetery of the Croix de Jésus, at Le Brère, four miles from Saint-Just."

"Your mother lived some years afterward?"

The young man nodded.

"Where did she die?"

Harry flushed slightly.

"Is there any need for these questions again?" he said. "I have told Lady Hilmerceux all this—and more—already."

"Yes, Mr. Vivian, they are necessary," was the quiet reply. "Very necessary," he repeated.

"My mother died in a London hotel."

"Did she tell you what brought her to England?"

"No; beyond, when she was dying, telling me to go to Hilmerceux, Sussex. But that you already know."

"She never spoke of your father's family to you?"

"No; never."

"And your father—did he never speak of them?"

Harry merely shook his head, with a slightly vexed air. Again the lawyer's eyes besought patience.

"I have to ask you these things, Mr. Vivian. There is a gap which has not been explained. I am not throwing doubt on your story, but for your own sake we must support it with proof. On your own showing, your mother, when she was dying, told you to go to Hilmerceux, and that is twelve years ago. Since then we have advertised for you repeatedly, and you have made no sign."

"I have been beyond the reach of newspapers," replied Harry, "and I have told Lady Hilmerceux why I did not come here at the time. If you had wanted me then you could have found me, before I went to sea."

"I cannot hold myself responsible for that," was the dry response. "It was your mother's business to communicate with me before attempting to return from abroad. Her visit to England was injudicious, though I can guess the motive, and make some allowance for it. My first knowledge of her absence from France was her failure to acknowledge a certain enclosure which—after your father's death—was forwarded to her quarterly."

"Was it you, then, who sent my mother her income?" asked Harry, with a sudden quickening of interest.

"Your mother received her allowance through me," rejoined Mr. Lemartine, "I had inquiries made, when the last quarterly draft remained unacknowledged. I learnt

then that your mother had visited London some months before, and died suddenly in an hotel there. You had disappeared."

"Yes, on a sailing-ship, taken away by a sea-captain who befriended me."

"It was not a matter of great consequence at the time," pursued the lawyer. "There was really no particular reason for tracing you just then, if I may say so now. We learnt you had gone to sea, and that ended it. But your existence became of importance some years later."

"Why?" Harry asked.

Mr. Lemartine hesitated.

"To make it clear to you, I shall have to go back forty years," he said.

"A long time!"

"It depends on the point of view. The man you so strongly resemble was your grandfather, the Honorable Harry Hilmerceux, brother of the late peer, who was drowned off the Cornish coast during a fishing expedition forty years ago. Some months after his death a young woman appeared here and told Lord Hilmerceux that his brother, the dead man, had married her when at Cambridge eight years before. The marriage had been kept secret at her husband's request, but on hearing of his death she came forward to have it acknowledged for the child's sake, a boy of seven. Such was her story. Lord Hilmerceux sent for me. There was no doubt about the marriage—the proofs were undeniable.

"Lord Hilmerceux made her a suitable provision. She went away quite content with what had been done for her, and the acknowledged widow of Lord Hilmerceux's brother. As she was not of the same social station as her late husband she preferred to live quietly in another county with her mother, as Mrs. Vivian, which is one of the family names. But when she died, five years later, she left her son to Lord Hilmerceux's care. Lord Hilmerceux and his wife accepted the charge, and the boy,

then twelve years old, was brought to Hilmerceux. He grew up with their sons, and was given an equal education. In every respect he was treated as if he had been their own child. But he turned out wild: the reckless and unfortunate temperament of the father early became apparent in the son. He was popular and handsome, but he had the same weaknesses, and he wrecked his life in a precisely similar way. At the age of twenty-one he contracted a runaway marriage with a girl of the village, of humble origin, some years older than himself.

"Lord Hilmerceux was dead when the marriage took place—killed by a fall in the hunting field, six months before—so the duty of arranging the unhappy affair devolved upon me. There were reasons—unfortunate reasons into which I need not enter—which made it advisable for the young couple to leave the district where they were known, and settle elsewhere. Your father preferred to go abroad, and the South of France was decided upon. Thither they went, and there they remained, living on an allowance made by Lady Hilmerceux, paid quarterly by me. After your father's death the allowance was continued to your mother on condition that she did not return to England.

"That state of affairs was ended by your mother's death and your disappearance. Time went on, and the memory of this affair had faded from our minds, when there came the calamity of the great war. Lady Hilmerceux's four sons gave their lives, one after the other, as they came to military age, that England might live. George, the eldest, was the first, killed in action with his regiment two weeks after going to the front. Wilfred, the second son, had a short and gallant career as a soldier, and lived long enough to receive a D. S. O. and Bar. Then he was bombed in a hospital at Étaples, and so died. Dene, the third son, attached to the Flying Corps, lost his life in a reprisal raid upon a German border town. Chaloner, the youngest, was gassed and invalided home, but died at

the base hospital in France. Thus in the brief space of four years were the hopes of a great English family laid low, like so many more.

"When the last son died I instituted a search for you. You were too young to have been called up in the war, unless towards the very end, so I hoped to trace you without great difficulty. By the irony of war, your life, hitherto not of much consequence to anyone but yourself, had become a thing of the first importance to an old English family. But all efforts to trace you proved unsuccessful. It seemed as though the earth—or perhaps the sea—had swallowed you. But I persevered until I received a report that you were believed to have been aboard a steamer called the *Golden Crown*, which went down with all hands during a typhoon in the China Sea. I was greatly pleased when I learnt from Lady Hilmerceux that you had made your appearance at Hilmerceux in this strange way, or, as she herself puts it, been directed here by the hand of God."

Harry had listened to the lawyer's story in a tumult of feeling, which obscured his perception of its ultimate end. His mind fumbled for it now.

"After all, does it matter so much?" he asked.

"Does what matter?"

"Why, whether I'm proved a member of the family or not?"

"It matters very much indeed—when we have established proofs of your birth, and there will be no difficulty in doing that." The lawyer spoke quickly, with a note of excitement in his voice. "I thought I had made it clear. The late Lord Hilmerceux had only one brother, your grandfather, who was drowned forty years ago. Do you not understand?"

"This is all so vague and strange to me that I'm afraid I do not quite grasp the implication of all you have told me," the young man rejoined. "After all, what am I to the Hilmerceux family, or they to me? On your own showing they banished my father while he

was alive, and ignored my mother and myself after his death."

"There were reasons for that," returned the lawyer, with a resumption of his former tone, "reasons of which you may or may not be aware. And Lady Hilmerceux continued your father's allowance to your mother after his death, although there was no legal obligation upon her to do so. But I would rather not touch on these points. Your mother is dead, and it is better to leave the past at rest. The present is far more important. Twenty-four hours ago there was no visible heir. It seemed as though the family was doomed to extinction, and that with the death of Lady Hilmerceux a great name would die. It was a source of grief to Lady Hilmerceux, who nevertheless for years past has clung to and worked for a faint hope in which, to speak frankly, I did not share. But she was right. For now, with your happy and opportune appearance, let us trust that the name of Hilmerceux will continue. I hope I have made everything quite clear to you," he concluded, in his prim, professional voice.

The young man looked at him nervously.

"I—I think so," he stammered. "You mean—you mean—" The words seemed to catch in his throat.

"I mean you are the next of kin," Mr. Lemartine gravely replied. "You are Lord Hilmerceux of Hilmerceux."

CHAPTER XI

THE HEIR

I

Many things flashed through the young man's mind as he heard of the dignity fortune had brought to him, but his emotions on the whole were chaotic. This hazard of chance was too tremendous for clear thought. A day before—and less than that—he, alone in the world and almost friendless, had made a diffident approach up the winding avenue of this great house, wondering what kind of reception might await him there. And now . . .

He turned towards the lawyer, who seemed to understand his thoughts, and smiled encouragingly.

"Your inheritance is rather a barren honor at present," he went on. "As a heritage it has been impoverished in the past, though, to be sure, things might have been worse—oh, yes, very easily worse. The estate has been at nurse for a number of years now, and has pulled round to some extent. My good friend, Radford, the steward, has achieved wonders since he has been here—with Lady Hilmerceux's help of course. Although we are not out of the wood yet—no, not by a long way—the position is very much improved to what it was. And Lady Hilmerceux is an extremely wealthy woman, with a private fortune inherited from her father. Yes, undoubtedly matters might be worse for you."

He glanced across the table at the heir. The young man appeared excited, which was very natural indeed. Strange he should have turned up in this unexpected fashion from the other side of the world, after all these years, to succeed to the Hilmerceux estate! He went on:

"Your position here will not be a light one. It will

be your duty to restore a great house fallen into decline. The family history has been a tragic one since your grandfather went away, but I hope your coming will bring happiness to the house. You must save the name from extinction, and marry well. It would be calamitous if the name of Hilmerceux were to die out now."

The young man smiled a little nervously.

"What you have told me is so very strange that I cannot realize it all yet," he said.

"Of course I can understand that," returned the lawyer, smiling sympathetically in reply. "Strange? Ay, strange indeed, but in keeping with the history of this house. Some strange events have happened here within my memory of the place; yes, and sad ones too. May your fortune be more prosperous than the lot of some who have gone before!" He glanced round meditatively at the lofty, faded walls, then went on. "But it has been a great house, and it's still a great name. I hope you will be happy here. And, now, if you please, we will return to the drawing-room. Lady Hilmerceux asked me to bring you back to her as soon as the story was told. She will be waiting for us. Let us go to her."

They left the library together, and went upstairs. As the lawyer said, Lady Hilmerceux was waiting in the drawing-room—waiting for them with an expectant air. She looked up as they entered. Mr. Lemartine went towards her.

"Well, I've told him," he said.

She nodded with a quick approval, and uttered a single word:

"All?"

"Why, yes," said the lawyer, "all that is necessary for the present."

The lawyer and she exchanged a look. His words appeared to satisfy her. She turned to the young man with tears in her eyes, and went to where he stood, reaching forth her hand until it rested on his shoulder. He alone heard her whispered speech:

"Harry, remember always who you are. May God help you to do your duty here."

In these words she welcomed home the heir. He hesitated, then bowed before her, went a step nearer and kissed her on the cheek. The lawyer, watching them both, noted with a quick eye the air of grace he infused into this act. "A ready youth where women are concerned, like all the men of the Hilmerceux race," he thought to himself. "The manner and gesture are there. Ah, well, the young man has his work ahead of him. I hope he'll never regret his heritage."

Lady Hilmerceux was speaking to Harry.

"Harry, you know now whom you resemble," she said, "and why I was startled when I saw you yesterday in the steward's room. You are the last of the house, and the striking likeness of your grandfather, who was drowned at sea, Mr. Lemartine"—she turned to the confidential advisor—"he lives again in Harry, don't you think?"

The lawyer nodded, and muttered. "To be sure. A speaking resemblance, indeed!"

"So I think," she went on, in a calmer voice, her eyes dwelling on the young man with a kind of wonder. "I live again, too, and the house lives also! After all these years! Mr. Lemartine, I could almost think we were back forty years ago."

"It is not quite the same thing," said Mr. Lemartine, meeting her fluttering look with a faint, dry smile.

"Oh, you needn't remind me of that," she rejoined, in a low tone. She was silent for a space, and then said, in brisker voice: "And now, Lemartine, what is the next step? What have we to do?"

"The proofs must be assembled," was the legal response. "The inheritance must be established in a proper lawful way. I will push matters forward when I return to town to-morrow, and I'll see to it that all legal formalities are got over in the shortest possible time."

"Yes; do," she said, with an emphatic nod. "It

will be easy, for there is very little to prove. And, as Harry is the undoubted heir of Hilmerceux, is there any reason why it should not be known?"

"Why not?" said Mr. Lemartine, stroking his chin. "I see no reason at all. Indeed, as he will be Lord Hilmerceux—and is that at the present moment, only waiting on the law's delays—it may be to advantage to let the household know at once. But any wider publicity, or celebration might be more fittingly withheld until the inheritance is established by the law of England. Until that moment arrives the heir had better remain alone here with you."

Lady Hilmerceux nodded approval.

"Yes, I suppose so," she said. She turned to Harry. "You'll stay quietly with me at Hilmerceux until this is all arranged, will you not, Harry?" she said. "You may be sure it will be different later on."

Harry, listening in some bewilderment to these plans for the future, heard a small clock on the mantelpiece chime with a sound like a ship's bell. The past came back with a rush.

"I had forgotten the *Avenel*," he said uncomfortably.

Mr. Lemartine raised inquiring eyes.

"My ship," explained the heir. "I am second mate aboard her. She is lying at Falmouth Bay. My leave expires to-morrow."

"You cannot return to the ship," said Lady Hilmerceux, with a smile. "Lemartine, you must see to this."

The lawyer bowed.

"I will take it upon myself to arrange," he said. "The *Avenel*, I think Lord Hilmerceux mentioned, lying in Falmouth Bay? What is the captain's name?"

Harry told him and added the information that the *Avenel* was rather a tub, of elderly build, with a blunt nose and a streak of yellow to her funnel. Captain McQuade would send his things ashore after the discharge was arranged.

"Very well," said the lawyer, "I shall be happy to

undertake this. You need think no more of the matter."

The power of his new dignity to banish the despotism of the sea impressed Harry more than anything which had gone before. But the flight of his seaman's fancy wavered and fell in the effort to picture Captain McQuade's face when he heard the news. There was whimsicality in the thought.

Lady Hilmerceux broached another subject.

"And now about money, Lemartine. Can the estate provide anything yet?"

The lawyer shrugged doubtful shoulders without speaking.

"Ah, well," she said understandingly, "that can be arranged. Fortunately I have plenty. I will place a sum to his credit in the local bank for personal needs. That will do for the present. Later on we will arrange for a yearly allowance of two thousand pounds."

The heir heard these words with a kind of wonder. In the romantic circumstances of his heritage the thought of money had not yet entered his head. He was overpowered by the generosity of Lady Hilmerceux, and the magnitude of the income she had named. Two thousand a year! For less than a sixth of that sum, paid quarterly by niggard owners, Captain McQuade drove a crazy steamer across implacable seas, spent sleepless nights and anxious days, and lived a life of exile from wife and family. And he, Harry Vivian, was to have two thousand a year for doing nothing at all! He uttered broken words of protest and thanks.

"You are too good, Lady Hilmerceux. I cannot take all this money. I do not need it."

"You are now head of this house," she said, looking him in the eyes. "I have but one wish in life, and that is to see the name of Hilmerceux live. The amount is not too much. You have many demands in your new position, and your affairs are mine. You will see to this, Lemartine?"

The lawyer sat down at the bureau and drew forth a sheet of note-paper.

"I will write at once to the manager of the bank," he said.

"And now let us have lunch," said Lady Hilmerceux, when he rose.

It was a meal of subdued ceremony, and one of discomfort for the heir, who knew he was under the scrutiny of their eyes, and no doubt the servants' eyes as well. He felt he was on trial, and that gave him a feeling of self-consciousness difficult to shake off. He wondered what they were thinking of him, and it would not have lessened his nervousness if he had known that Lady Hilmerceux, at that moment lifting her glass to him with a smile, was inwardly and anxiously pondering the best way of teaching him his new path in life. At length the ordeal came to a conclusion. Lady Hilmerceux rose from the table, and left him with a nod and a smile.

The lawyer took him back to the library. Here, seated at one of the tables, he asked the young man more questions, and made notes of the replies. Tea was brought to them there at four o'clock. When it arrived Mr. Lemartine gathered up his papers, and gave himself over to the pleasure of conversation and the meal.

"I have all the details I need," he said, as he stirred his tea. "I wish I could have troubled you less, but it is best to be on the safe side. Now, matters will not take long. The law can move quickly enough when all is plain sailing. In this case there is really very little to do. Lady Hilmerceux has honored me with an invitation to be her guest for the night, but I'll return by the first train in the morning and get to work. Proofs of your birth can be readily obtained, and practically the only other thing to do is to make application to a judge in chambers for the right to presume proof of your grandfather's death. There will be no difficulty about that, and, in fact, we could dispense with such an application, altogether. The

issue does not actually arise. In English law, death may be presumed after seven years' absence. Your grandfather disappeared many years ago."

"I heard Lady Hilmerceux say it was forty years ago," said Harry.

"Yes," responded the lawyer, "it's a good forty years back since he set out from Hilmerceux for a fishing holiday in Cornwall, taking with him as servant and humble companion one William Fenton, a native of these parts. They were never seen alive again. All we learnt was that they set out fishing from Penzance one day, and two days afterwards the battered wreck of their empty boat was washed up on the rocks near Land's End, after a terrible storm. Fenton's body was cast ashore near the same spot later. Your grandfather's body was never found. But of his death there can be no possible doubt."

There was silence for a moment, and then Harry spoke.

"If you have finished asking questions may I ask one or two in my turn?"

The lawyer looked thoughtfully towards the far end of the library, where a shaft of light fell through the high window, turning the brass trellis railing into fretwork of living gold.

"Go on," he said.

"You told me this morning that I had inherited a barren honor. What did you actually mean by that?"

"I meant that you had come in for very little income with the title. There have been some reckless possessors of Hilmerceux in the past. The Hilmerceux blood runs a little wild, at times—on the male side. I may as well tell you this frankly, because it's a thing pretty widely known in the country. Past improvidence and gambling—to say nothing of other foibles—have crippled what was once a very fine estate. The last Lord Hilmerceux had none of the reckless strain. He was a prudent and capable man, and with his wife's help, and the assistance of her fortune, he set himself to the task of lightening the burden

of his predecessors' imprudence, and of paying off some of the incumbrances of the estate. When he died his widow carried on the work, with the invaluable aid of Radford, the steward, who has been her right hand. She did it for her sons, but continued after their deaths, so you will reap the ultimate benefit. In time to come you will be a wealthy man, though the estate will need nursing for a long while yet."

"And Hilmerceux—is it mine also?"

"The house and the entailed estate are yours, but Hilmerceux could not be kept up without Lady Hilmerceux's own fortune. The income from the estate is devoted to paying off some of the existing mortgages. I need hardly tell you that it will be wise to continue this course for some years to come. You will understand the position better when we go into the figures."

The young man looked at the lawyer thoughtfully.

"Then I have actually nothing but what Lady Hilmerceux will allow me?" he queried.

"I would not look at it in that light," Mr. Lemartine answered. "I do not think you need have any scruples about accepting the allowance. Lady Hilmerceux intends to make you her heir also. There is no secret in that, as she will tell you so herself. Therefore, it is only your duty to regard her wishes about the future as far as possible, but I do not think you will find your present dependence on her an irksome obligation. She is devoted to the house, and she loves you already, as you have seen. That is the great thing, after all. Where love is, there need be no great burden of gratitude or obligation on either side."

Harry studied the table before him for a moment before he spoke again.

"And the steward—Radford—what is his position here? When I came yesterday he interviewed me. He seems to have many privileges and much power."

The lawyer fingered his glasses and shot a peculiar glance at the heir.

"Radford takes the responsibility of the house on his shoulders and protects Lady Hilmerceux," he answered slowly. "Of course he did not realize who you were. He is a valuable steward and rather a remarkable man, completely devoted to the welfare of the estate. His shrewd and economical management has accomplished much, and improved your inheritance to an extent which I should have thought impossible fifteen years ago. It is well to bear this in mind, and you will be wise to exercise forbearance here."

"I did not care for his attitude towards me when I arrived yesterday."

"Ah, well, perhaps that was excusable," the lawyer returned. "Radford is a little difficult at times. No one knows it better than myself. He has had his own way here for years, and to all intents and purposes has been the master of the estate. His has been a thankless and arduous task, but he has discharged it with unswerving fidelity. Of course he must adjust himself to the new order of things, but you would find it difficult to replace him."

"I shall certainly not interfere with him. I am quite a stranger here, knowing nothing of things."

"I am glad to hear you say so. It augurs well for the future. You may with perfect confidence leave the management of the estate in Radford's hands." Mr. Lemartine rose. "And now, permit me, as the legal advisor and an old friend of the family, to offer you my congratulations. I rejoice with Lady Hilmerceux that you have been spared to come into your own. Yours is a heavy responsibility, but I do not think you have anything to fear. Do you know the motto of your house? 'A Hilmerceux never turns aside.'"

"Thank you," said Harry simply, and held out his hand.

Mr. Lemartine gathered up his papers. They left the library and went their ways: the lawyer to the drawing-room, and Harry, thoughtfully to his room.

II

On the dressing-table he found a sealed packet addressed simply to "Harry," in a thin pointed feminine hand. He opened it, and turned over the pink slips of the long slim book within. It was a cheque-book; money; true symbol of liberty—the power which strikes off men's chains. He had learnt its value in years of hard fighting for the right to live. Now, by the power of the symbol, freedom and comfort were his. He was no longer of the slaves of the world, but one of its possessors. The flimsy book on the dressing-table gave him his inexplicable freedom. It did more. It ended his past life for ever, and cut him off from the sea. That was a sad thought, for the charm of the sea was in his blood. The sea! It cajoled and whispered like a woman, and was loved and forgiven again and again. It was a hard life, but he had always loved it, and by serving it with devotion had made his way aft from the fo'c'sle in the course of years. And now he was deserting it, the wonderful feminine sea, for a life of which he knew nothing at all. The romance of destiny had brought him there, and made a lord of him, without bestowing upon him the qualifications for his part. Romance? He wondered now, standing there, whether any life on land could hold such romance as the floating sea. . . .

He stared into the mirror before him absent-mindedly, as though it were a magic looking-glass which revealed the future in which his path was set. Then he turned restlessly away. He shunned his own thoughts just then. He wanted to learn and see more before he trusted himself to think. Slowly he left the room.

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The thoughts of Mr. Lemartine, dressing for dinner later, also ran on the events of the day. As he brushed his hair, his mirror reflected an elderly gentleman whose

dry visage showed symptoms of the perplexing current of thoughts in his mind. His speculations were of the future too. On the whole he approved of the heir. He was modest, which at least was something in an age of too-flamboyant youth. All the better, for it was not going to be all plain sailing for him. His unexpected appearance meant great changes in Hilmerceux. And there were hidden currents in the calm, still backwater of the old house—currents which needed a wary hand to clear. The lawyer knew it—none better than he.

“How will he handle things?” He murmured, speaking half aloud, in the manner of one who lives alone. “I’ve dropped him a hint—more than enough for his guidance, if he is quick enough to pick it up and understand it. It will need care. Radford will know all by now. What attitude will he adopt towards the heir, and what will be the heir’s attitude to him? Well, he has had a long reign. A very interesting situation, and a subtle one too.”

He laid his brushes on the toilet table and stood there, deep in thought. Now the heir had returned the steward was no longer the power of the estate. His authority was fallen—vanished in a night, and henceforward he was under the sway of an inexperienced master who had been reared outside of the traditions of the house. A bitter and rather pathetic position for one who for so long had borne himself like master there! What would happen? Would Radford do his best for the new lord, who now reigned where he used to command? The situation ran too deep for Mr. Lemartine to foresee the end. He thrust it from him now, with the thought that he would be at hand to learn the issue. Having completed dressing, he left the room to go downstairs.

The lawyer found the steward with Lady Hilmerceux in the drawing-room downstairs. She had been telling him the news, it appeared. But what Radford thought of it was not to be gathered from his expression. He

nodded to the lawyer as the latter entered. They had met before earlier in the day.

And then the new heir came into the room. Mr. Lemartine kept his eye upon Radford. The steward rose, went a step forward, and bowed to the young man.

Harry held out his hand. Some instinct (perhaps it sprang from the lawyer's advice) prompted him to conciliate this granite figure of a man.

"I have much to learn here, Mr. Radford," he said. "I hope you will instruct me in all things about the estate."

The steward bowed again, and seemed, in his sober way, to be considering a reply to this speech. But before he could utter it Mr. Lemartine joined them.

"A happy gathering!" said he. "The laird, the estate, and the law."

"Ah, here is Ailsa," said Lady Hilmerceux.

Harry turned quickly at the sight of the slim figure in white. She was like a wild flower plucked off the downs, he thought. There was something flowerlike in the moulding of her tender face and the curves of her pretty mouth. She came into the room with a faint heightening of color and drooped eyes. Lady Hilmerceux took her hand.

"Harry," she said, "this is my little companion, Ailsa Rose. I have told her who you are."

The young man shook hands with a smile.

"We have met before now," he said. "Haven't we, Miss Rose?"

"Yes," said Ailsa. "I am glad you have come to Lady Hilmerceux."

"I hope we shall all be happy together," said Lady Hilmerceux. "Harry, if you want to know our Sussex downs, you must take Ailsa as your guide. No one loves them better than she. She was born on them."

She surveyed the young people with gracious eyes. The girl stood still, paling and flushing deliciously. It was left for Mr. Lemartine to observe the steward's

glance converge upon her face. No doubt she was well worth looking at, with a faint air of grace and breeding which seemed a surprising heritage there, but was Radford such a connoisseur of arched eyebrows and slender nostrils that he drank in her loveliness with thirsty eyes? Then the steward looked away, and the lawyer came to the conclusion that perhaps he had been mistaken.

For some years past dinner at Hilmerceux had been a quiet and lonely affair. This night it was different, the precursor of more vivacious meals to come. "A cheerful family gathering," Lady Hilmerceux called it, though it was hardly that. Cheerful it certainly was, and an air of festivity reigned in the great dining-room. The lawyer proposed the health of the heir in a precise little speech, and they drank to him and the great day. Again, it was only Mr. Lemartine who observed that the steward merely put his glass to his lips. Ailsa, following Lady Hilmerceux's lead, lifted a shy glass to the young man. He caught her glance, and was happy. It was his moment, and a joyous one. The eyes of youth thought they discerned a new heaven and a new earth.

BOOK II

GROWTH

CHAPTER XII

HEIR OF HILMERCEUX

I

Thus the heir came to his estate, and laid aside a seaman's life with his memories of the sea. He was no more Harry Vivian, but the twelfth baron of Hilmerceux, whose business was not the sea or ships, but the restoration of his house and the continuance of an ancient name. He did not find it easy to shut out memory, concerned though he was with these more important things; especially of evenings, when, dressing for dinner, his eye would fall upon the shabby outline of his sea-chest, which had been brought from the *Avenel* and placed in his dressing-room adjoining. It was then, in the great old house set in the midst of the downs, that he would think of another and more familiar green—the sweet and haunting immobility of the sea.

In his new life he was nervous and self-conscious, but facile and eager too. The quickness came from the ancestor who had given him good looks—the grandfather whose portrait hung in the gallery upstairs—and the nervousness was the outcome of long years spent afloat. Everything was now so different, and he had much to learn. It was all bewildering and new. His old life was gone, and in his new one he seemed to himself to be merely acting a strange part. The respect and attention accorded by the household as part of his birthright was a source of embarrassment to him. He accepted it uncertainly because he had not been brought up to it, and therefore lacked the inherent complacency of those who receive such things as their natural due. Sometimes, when the servants addressed him by his new title, he would start and flush a little, wondering if they saw through him and sounded

the depths of his shortcomings from the guarded cover of respectful eyes.

That, however, was only at first. With the adaptability of human nature, he gradually became accustomed to the routine of an altered environment. If he still faltered and made some mistakes, there was one always by him to give him encouragement and to offer him help. He could not have had a more admirable mentor than Lady Hilmerceux in his new career. If he lacked pride of birth, she had enough for both, and she sought to foster it in him. "Remember your blood, Harry." Constantly she harped on that theme, forgetful of the baser strain which flowed in the heir's veins from his father's unfortunate marriage with a village girl a quarter of a century before. Happily there was no reason why she should remember it now. The heir's maternal grandfather had died two years before, thus snapping the last link between Hilmerceux and an ill-bred connection in a damp cottage near the village inn. Lady Hilmerceux felt that Providence had acted with great propriety in removing this old man, and she was not without gratitude for the act.

Tradition and duty—these were her watchwords for the heir; the traditions of his house and the duties of his high estate. Duty! She had brought home to him the English meaning of the word. Responsibility had come to him, and she was going to see that he shouldered it. She pointed out to him the lines where his duty lay.

"You must take your seat in the House of Lords, Harry," she said. He looked at her blankly. "Oh, no, I would not care to do that," he replied. Her eyes met his in cold surprise. "My dear boy, it is your duty. A Hilmerceux has always sat in the House of Lords." He did not see why repetition of an act made it a duty at last, and he wondered if the English conception of the meaning of the word was based on custom and long usage. Perhaps there was something to be said for such a point of view.

From a more practical standpoint he spent long days with Radford, endeavoring to master the working details

of the management of the estate. As Lady Hilmerceux said, it was only right, after so many years without a head, that the estate should have the assiduity of a Hilmerceux's personal care. But his acquirement of this difficult business was slow. There was much to learn, and the steward was notably of few words. Sometimes Harry wondered whether his brusqueness covered a deeper irritation underneath, but Radford was always civil, after his fashion, and perhaps tried to teach him too. Knowing that the steward had managed the business of Hilmerceux for twenty years, Harry endeavored to think so.

And the young man had the traditions of the house to learn, for he was the head of a family of which he knew nothing at all. Of the history and achievements of a long line of ancestors he was completely ignorant. Again, it was Lady Hilmerceux who remedied this state of affairs. The glories of Hilmerceux and its past! That was a subject of which she never tired. Walking up and down the picture gallery with the heir, she would descant upon it for hours at a time. But for all her intelligence she failed to detect the gulf between them here. It was the difference between the old order and the new; between one born and bred in the tradition of race, and another brought up entirely outside it. And besides, he had wandered far. Sometimes, listening to her telling him these old tales in the golden voice, which, at least, never failed to charm him, Harry wondered if they were of any real importance, after all.

What did it matter if the Hilmerceux arms were registered in the time of the Confessor, or if the family pedigree was in the British Museum? Hilmerceux lineage and heraldry, and coat armor which had bedecked Hilmerceux men at Agincourt—did such things count for anything, in the world as it was today? There were lands with older histories than England, and whose hand kept the hoary traditions of the sea? So he mused; but he kept these thoughts to himself. Certainly Lady Hilmerceux was the last person to whom he would have confided them, and

he even tried to put them out of his own mind. For was he not the head of the house, and were not the glorious traditions his?

He thought it a strange lot which had befallen him: Hilmerceux and the downs in place of the sea. When the gulls flew inland from the Channel he tried to think of the downs as an ocean, and when the wind sang around the house at night it sounded in his ears like the noise of the shrouds at sea. But these fancies were not convincing. He came back with a start to reality and the knowledge of this strange life in Sussex England. Instead of the ship's bells in the early morning he heard the cuckoo (most rural of sounds!) calling from the far side of the lake, or listened to a thrush piping a madrigal on the lawn beneath his window. It was pleasant later to descend to breakfast with the ladies, in a room with a view upon the downs, and to accompany them afterwards to the lake, where Ailsa fed the swans. This was all very charming, and the heir, with the heedlessness of youth, would have been contented to pass the whole of the morning in the same idyllic way. But Lady Hilmerceux had other views. Duty! The training process went on.

The time drew near when he was to assume his public part in the eyes of the world, or the county—which was much the same thing. Mr. Lemartine wrote to say that everything was prepared. The proofs were gathered, the application to a judge in chambers might be heard any day. When the voice of the justice spoke the curtain was to be drawn up. Already there had been rehearsals at Hilmerceux for the great event. The news had gone round, and there were many callers from the county folk who came to congratulate the mistress of Hilmerceux upon the opportune arrival of an heir whose early life had been spent “abroad”—a word which allows for much in insular English ears, and obviates much questioning. The Gwynnes and the Westmoncotes came, and Sir Hilary Fieldhurst drove over from Fieldhurst Court with his daughter Violet. Lady Alwyn and the Honorable Agatha

Peacock hastened their return from London in order to congratulate Lady Hilmerceux. Mrs. Fredcroft came in her new car, bringing both her daughters. Afterwards she told Mrs. Adsell, the vicar's wife, that she was charmed with the heir, and she wondered if dear Lady Hilmerceux would marry him in the county. Mrs. Adsell thought Lady Hilmerceux would, but secretly she doubted whether Ruth or Cecily Fredcroft would be reckoned with the elect, because the mistress of Hilmerceux was such a stickler for birth.

But Lady Hilmerceux was not thinking of the question of succession just then. That was to look too far ahead. Undoubtedly she intended Harry to marry early and to marry well. There were various possibilities in the county around her, and at the right moment she would make her deliberate choice. But until then she was not the woman to confide her plans to anyone, least of all to the mothers of daughters who were angling for the prize. It was a weighty responsibility, not to be lightly settled: the future Hilmerceux and the mother of the next heir. But she intended that the girl chosen for that honor should be of her selection and of hers alone. The possibility that Harry might fall in love on his own account did not seem to have occurred to her.

CHAPTER XIII

YOUTH

I

It befell that Mr. Lemartine returned without warning, empowered by judicial pronouncement to declare that the heir's grandfather was dead in the eyes of the English law. Harry, out with the steward on the estate, was brought back to the house by a messenger sent to fetch him, and he and Mr. Lemartine remained shut up in the library until lunch. The meal found the lawyer with business untransacted, a litter of law papers still to be perused. But these were to do with Lady Hilmerceux, and not the heir. There were documents of settlement and the draft of a fresh will, which he desired to discuss with her quite privately. So, when Harry asked him if he needed his presence again in the library during the afternoon, Mr. Lemartine was quick to say that he did not.

"Except for your name to a document, there's nothing else just now," he replied.

"Then I think I shall go for a walk on the downs," Harry said.

He looked a little distraught. There had been a finality about the morning's work which had filled him with a turmoil of thought. He wanted to be alone to think over everything.

Lady Hilmerceux looked at him with an affectionate smile.

"Yes, do," she said. "You have been very busy, and a walk on the downs will do you good. Ailsa might like to go with you and show you some of the beauty spots—she might take you up to Chanctonbury Ring."

She gave the girl an interrogating glance. "Would you, Ailsa?" Ailsa raised her face demurely.

"Yes, Lady Hilmerceux, if you wish me to go."

Lady Hilmerceux nodded at them both.

"Very well, then, you had better get away. You have a long afternoon before you. It is a beautiful day, so you need not hurry back—Lemartine and I have much business to discuss. And Ailsa"—she turned to the girl—"I should like you to walk home by way of the church. Lord Hilmerceux has not seen it yet, and he will be accompanying me to morning service on Sunday."

"Yes, Lady Hilmerceux," said Ailsa.

"Our little church at Tullington is dedicated in the name of St. Nicholas, Harry," Lady Hilmerceux explained. "He is the patron saint of sailors. Perhaps it was he who guided your footsteps here." She glanced at him tenderly.

Harry smoked a cigarette on the terrace while waiting for Ailsa. Soon she came, ready for walking. He gazed on her and thought how charming she looked. She asked him hurriedly if he cared to go to Chanctonbury.

"It's five miles away across there," she said pointing.

He said that he would like the walk. So they set out.

The way took them through the park, and across a mile or so of low downland into the village street, where the men touched their hats to the new lord and the women stared down from windows at him and the girl by his side. Ailsa walked fast, and was secretly glad when the village was left behind. Again the downs stretched before them, rising all the way. Soon they were out of sight and view of every living thing.

The solitude which surrounded them was very soft and restful. The downs sloped gently upward, the dark summit of Chanctonbury growing clearer and clearer as they walked. Away in the distance lay the Channel, extremely small, a faint blurred streak. A beautiful and very English scene, Harry thought—solitude without loneliness. No other country could achieve the combination. Far off he could hear the faint tinkle of a sheep bell, but there was

no other sound. The sheep were on a distant slope; tiny dabs of white on vivid green. The air came very sweet and fresh.

He glanced at Ailsa. She was surveying the solitary and open vista with sparkling eyes.

"Is it not beautiful up here?" she said.

"It is a very wonderful view," he replied. "I suppose you often come here?"

"Yes," she said. "Look! Can you see a small cottage by a wood, in that dip about two miles away? I was born there."

She pointed it out to him.

"It looks very pretty from here," he said, regarding it afar, "but rather a lonely place. I suppose you know the names of all these hills around us. What is that big one over there?"

"That is Cissbury," she replied. "It was a Roman fortress once, but before that the Celtic Britons fought for it."

"It would make a strong entrenchment for coastal defense now," he said, eyeing it. "Guns along those old earthworks would command the whole of the Channel. Will you take me over there some day?"

"Yes, if you like," she said a little shyly, "but I do not care for Cissbury very much. I like this part of the downs ever so much more. From the top of Cissbury you cannot help seeing all the new red bungalows climbing up the slopes on that side, and the golf links, where there are always a lot of idle people walking about. Such things do not seem to belong to the downs. I don't know if you understand what I mean." She hesitated, seeking nervously for words. "You see, the downs about here haven't changed for hundreds of years, and if people were allowed to build funny little red houses on them they would be spoilt for ever. At least, their beauty would be gone."

He gave her a quick smile.

"And the illusion of antiquity destroyed? I understand." He nodded towards distant Cissbury. "Perhaps

that old hill is guarding them for you. Can you imagine it, peopled with shaggy and ghostly legions, holding your downs inviolate against the advance of the red-tiled roofs on the far side? 'Death to the bungalows and jerry-builders!' That's the battle-cry. You picture Cissbury, aroused once more by vandals from the sleep of centuries, rearing his great head, and roaring it forth. How the cry would echo across the solitude of the downs! He looks quite able to do it, the grim old chap. You had better ask him to, for your sake."

She laughed happily.

"I will try and remember when I am on Cissbury again. If I think of it I will whisper in his ear."

"I will remind you," he said.

They continued their way upwards towards the crest of Chanctonbury, and reached it with a golden sky above them and the view across the Weald clear. In the distance the northern downs showed, and between lay the level panorama of the Sussex Weald: villages, trees and roads in miniature, like a great picture made from a height.

Side by side they stood on the summit, looking upon this scene. He drew a long breath.

"Thank you for bringing me here," he said. "It is worth coming a long way to see. I feel exactly like Gulliver looking at Lilliput. I want to pick up some of those cattle in that field down there and carry them aboard ship in my pocket."

Ailsa glanced at his face to see if he meant it. The idea seemed whimsical to her, but she had never heard of Lilliput before. She turned her back on the view of the Weald to gaze upon her own familiar downs: combes and valleys, and round-topped hills, inclining downward in calm loveliness towards the edge of the distant sea. She pointed to where a great velvet sweep of green curved majestically away from the actual summit of the Ring.

"There is a very wonderful dewpond over there," she said, "a dewpond which is supposed to be hundreds and hundreds of years old. Would you like to see it?"

But his eyes were fixed on a spot where the downs fell away and four high hills descended steeply to a valley, a faint track ribboning down one side. At the bottom lurked a tangle of undergrowth and scrubby wood, surrounding an old stone house in the deep dark space. The building enhanced rather than lessened the solitude and isolation of its setting. It stood in the silent gloom beneath, in the midst of bracken and old thorns and furze, seemingly as ancient as the downs themselves. And yet it showed no signs of decay. The depression in which it had been built was sheltered alike from the boisterous winds of the high downs and the salt corroding air of the sea. The hills near the foot sloped so steeply that they would take one downward at a run. It seemed to the young man the loneliest spot he had ever seen. He turned to Ailsa.

"Does anyone live in that queer place down there, at the foot of those four hills?" he asked.

Ailsa, looking in the indicated direction, turned a little pale.

"That is Mouldering House," she murmured.

"Mouldering House! It is certainly well-named," he said. "It looks like a mouldering skeleton in the middle of the downs—far too wretched and desolate for human occupation."

"Oh, it has been empty for a great number of years," Ailsa replied seriously. "No one about here knows when it was occupied—or supposed to be occupied—last."

"I cannot imagine any human being living there at any time—or wanting to," he said. "Look at that strange window in the middle of the roof! I wonder why such a place was ever built in the midst of the downs, away from everywhere?"

"It was a priory once upon a time, I have heard," rejoined Ailsa.

"A religious house? Why, that is interesting," he remarked. "I should like to go down and have a look at it, but it would be too much of a climb up here again."

"There's a path through the undergrowth in front," she said. "It's not so steep to get down on that side."

"Do you know the way?" he inquired.

She hesitated.

"Yes, but I would rather not go."

He glanced at her curiously, and she called up a faint smile.

"It is like a grave, down there," she said, with a slight shiver, "the only spot on the downs which I fear. But that is silly of me," she went on in a brighter tone. "I will take you down to it, if you like. Come!"

II

They set out across the wide slope, with Chanetonbury at their backs. The girl made the downward path by a long detour. The downs fell away more steeply, and the sky was partly hidden from sight. Harry guessed they had entered the deep fold of the hills where the stone house was hidden, but it had temporarily vanished from sight. Ailsa went on quickly, now along a short open slope, now across a narrow grassy ledge, and presently came to a stop in a little dark valley, filled with a dense straggling growth.

"Have we reached the bottom?" he asked.

She nodded, looking about her for a path. She found it and entered the thicket, and he followed her lead. Again she went quickly forward, now bending low where the undergrowth was too thick to walk upright, now holding back awkward branches for him to follow her through. Soon they emerged into the open space, in which the old stone building stood.

"Mouldering House," she said, almost in a whisper.

"It's an uncanny kind of place," he muttered, staring at it.

In the silence and gloom they stood still, looking at it. The low, square building encircled by a broken stone wall

suggested a mediæval, mildewed ghost of a house—a prison, Harry thought, for the windows had iron bars. It stood on a marshy strip of land at the foot of the four steep hills, which overtopped it completely and almost hid the sky. The place had been built for lack of room hard against two of these hills, which in their sharply rising ascent squeezed against the projecting rims of the windows supposed to look out on that side. Between the wall and the hill on the opposite side ran a brief level space, where some distorted trees grew; oaks stunted and warped, as if they had reached maturity in an agony of travail, and elms which had outshot the dwarfed oaks, like gaunt skeletons of trees trying to climb out of that gloomy valley. This side of the place was thick with ivy, which had crept out from the wall to cling to the trees, and was making its over-grown way across the flat stone-healed roof towards the window which gleamed in the roof from above.

Harry took in all these things as he gazed at the place. He turned to Ailsa with a smile.

“It looks worse down here than from above. Like a grave—as you said. A damp grave.”

But Ailsa could not manage a smile in response. She shivered again, and with reason now. For the air was cold and damp, like a pit.

“Is the place supposed to be haunted?” he asked.

“I don’t know. . . .” She spoke with the same odd quietness of tone. “No one about here will go near it, and I’ve heard my grandmother say that it was just the same as it is now when she was a girl—a desolate, forsaken place. I’ve heard her say, too, that the last gibbet in Sussex was put up somewhere near here.”

“I’m not surprised to hear it,” he commented. “It would be quite in keeping to see a man swinging from one of those trees in chains. I wonder who owns the place?”

She looked up at him shyly.

“It belongs to you,” she said. “It is a part of the Hilmerceux estate.”

“Oh, does it?” he exclaimed, eyeing it with a new

interest. "In that case we must try and find the key of that great brass-studded door. Then some day we'll look over it together.

"I don't think I'd like to do that," she said, with a little shake of the head.

"Well, then, let us have a closer look at my property now," he rejoined. He went to walk through the broken gateway, but she put out her hand. "No, no! I would rather not," she said tremulously.

"Why, you silly little girl, there's nothing to be afraid of," he said with a laugh. "Come on!" He took her by the arm.

They entered the enclosure by a gap where the gate had been, and picked their footsteps across the wet spongy ground between the wall and the house. Standing in silence before one of the bared windows, they peeped in.

At first it was difficult to see anything, because of the darkness within. Then their eyes made out the outline of a bare apartment, with an antique chimney-piece of cumbrous size opposite the window. Near the chimney-piece a heavy door stood ajar, giving a glimpse of a passage and an open door leading to another room. The big dark room into which they looked was a curious place, with walls of stone, and the dust of centuries on the stone floor. Harry, straining his eyes into the gloom, could faintly discern the outline of winged figures and fanciful shapes looking down from the shadowy walls. The space above the chimney-piece was filled with some design much larger than the rest. He thought he could see the form of a great gaunt figure with outstretched arms and drooping head, surrounded by wavy lines, like ribboned scrolls. But it was hard to tell what these vague outlines really were.

A faint cry from Ailsa reached him. He looked round. She had stepped back from the window with a sudden pallor in her face and dilated eyes.

"I thought I saw something move in there," she whispered.

He put his arm quickly around her, and could feel her shaking with fear. His eyes, searching the black and silent interior through the bars, could see nothing except the nondescript shapes which lurked on the naked walls. Abruptly he turned away.

"Come!" he said curtly, still holding her. "Let us leave this dismal hole."

She went with him quietly, without a word. They passed out of the gateway with the broken stone pillars, and crept back along the tangled path through the undergrowth until they were in the open once more. Ailsa's spirits returned, and she sprang lightly ahead. He had to quicken his pace to keep up with her. At length she paused on a round, grassy summit, looking about her.

"How lovely to be back on the downs!" she said, smiling. "I never wish to go there again." She did not look at the valley from which they had climbed, but gazed across the rising slope to the dark crest of Chanctonbury Ring.

"There was nothing inside that room," he said reassuringly. "It was only your fancy."

"Yes, I suppose so," she assented, stooping to pluck a celandine at her feet. "I don't know what made me so nervous down there."

"It's a weird, ghostly place," he said, "enough to make you nervous; only I shouldn't have thought you were a girl of that type."

"It isn't that," she began slowly.

He looked at her curiously.

"What is it, then?" he asked.

"I feel afraid of Mouldering House because I saw a light burning there one night last winter," she replied.

"Perhaps you were mistaken," he said. "I cannot imagine anyone spending a winter's night there."

She shook her head.

"I was not mistaken," she rejoined. "I saw the light quite plainly from my bedroom window on the other side of the downs. My grandmother saw it too. The light

was there for three nights running. And on the third night my grandmother died."

"That's strange," he said.

"Yes," she assented in a lifeless tone. "It is very strange."

The note of her voice startled him, and he saw fear in her eyes.

"Try not to think of it," he said soothingly. But she broke in:

"Do you believe in dreams? I had a very strange one that night."

"Tell me about it," he said, giving her a glance.

She looked up into his face; seemed to hesitate, then drew near him.

"I never wanted to speak of it, but I will tell you," she said.

And as they walked on, lingering a little at times, she related her dream about the floating cottage, and the solitary shepherd struggling in the waters of the Weald to reach her on the dark summit of Chanetonbury Ring. She dwelt on this part of the dream most—of the darkness, her feeling of loneliness, and the swimmer's strange loud song.

"When I woke up the song seemed to be still ringing in my ears," she said. "I knew the words too. It was a quaint old harvesting song which used to be sung about here long ago, but is quite forgotten now. I remember hearing my grandmother sing it when I was a very small girl. She told me her dead husband used to sing it."

"An unpleasant dream," he said thoughtfully, "and a little eerie as well."

"Yes, everything that happened that night was strange," she went on in a low tone. "The light, and the dream, and grandmother's death. She died in the strangest way. I woke up thinking I heard her call, and I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs. She was standing in the open doorway, staring out into the darkness. I got her into the house, and she died."

"Were you alone in the house with her when she died?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she said simply. "We lived alone—just granny and I—since my father died." She hesitated, then went on: "My grandmother had a bad shock at Mouldering House when she was a girl. She was lost on the downs in a fog, and found there unconscious in the morning. And that night, just before she died, it seemed as though it all came back to her. She thought the light at Mouldering House was for her. That was why—that was why. . . ."

Ailsa's voice failed her suddenly, and she turned her head away.

"Oh!" he cried in sudden understanding. "You poor child, how selfish of me! I had no idea of this, or that your life had been so sad. I wish I had known before. I'm sorry now that I asked you to take me down to the wretched place. It was enough to unnerve you."

"It does not matter at all," she replied, with rather a painful smile. "But I can't help wondering sometimes what it was my grandmother did see that night. The light burned steadily—a tiny flame of light in the blackness of the downs—but soon after my grandmother died it went out. It was just as though something came across the downs in the dark from Mouldering House, and grandmother saw it, and died from the shock. On stormy nights it all comes back to me," she said with a shudder.

"Try and put it out of your mind," was his reply. "Look here, if this horrible old place upsets you like this I'll see about having it pulled down."

"Oh, but you mustn't do that for me!" she said, a smile struggling through her distress.

"Why not? I am sure it's an eyesore on the downs," he retorted coolly. "But come, let us get away from here as quickly as possible. I do not much care for that valley myself. Which way do we go home?"

"We were to go back by Tullington, so as to see the church," she reminded him.

"We will not go to the church to-day," he said. It is rather late. We will go to-morrow, if you will take me."

"I could go in the afternoon," she said.

"Very well, I'll wait for you in the garden after lunch. And now, we will hurry home. See, the sun is beginning to cast long shadows on the grass."

They set off homeward. Ailsa did not speak for some time except to point out Hilmerceux from the heights when it made a momentary appearance in the distant haze, like a house in the clouds, only to vanish as quickly away.

The shadows were very much longer when they reached the park and turned in at the great iron gates.

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Lady Hilmerceux, talking to Radford on the terrace, looked towards them as they approached. "Oh, here you are!" she said. "Well, did you have a nice walk?"

"Very nice," said Harry in answer. "We climbed to Chanetonbury Ring. It's a fine view from there. I enjoyed the walk very much."

Lady Hilmerceux nodded approval, and glanced towards Ailsa.

"Ailsa, my dear, I feel a little cold. Will you bring me a wrap?"

The girl departed on the errand. Harry paused for a moment before speaking again.

"I saw a very curious place from the heights—a grotesque old building of stone, erected in a most lonely spot at the bottom of four hills. I understand it belongs to the estate."

He glanced up inquiringly. It was the steward who spoke.

"You must mean Mouldering House," he said.

"Yes, that is its name," answered Harry. "What use is it there, empty, deserted, and old? I think it ought to be pulled down."

There was silence. Lady Hilmerceux shook her head

gently, but the dying light showed the constraint of Radford's face. It was he who spoke.

"We do not pull down old places in England," was the observation he made. Then he went back into his reserve. The next moment he turned away.

CHAPTER XIV

HIRONDELLE

I

He was waiting for her the next afternoon at the bend of the long flagged path by the urns, and went forward to meet her as she descended the terrace. She glanced up through veiled lashes rather nervously, a little over-awed just then, a little troubled about the thought of their respective positions and the knowledge that she had come out to meet him in this secluded part of the garden, hidden from the view of the house. For a moment they looked at each other in silence before she spoke.

"I don't know whether I can come with you this afternoon," she said. "Lady Hilmerceux is resting, and she does not know——"

"Oh, come along—bother letting people know!" he interrupted. "If it comes to that, I'm playing truant too. Radford wanted me to go with him this afternoon—somewhere on the estate, down to the model farm. But I told him it was impossible."

She considered this gravely.

"Ought we to go?" she asked.

"Why, of course!" he replied. "Just look at that sky. It is much too good a day to waste looking at animals on the model farm. A walk will be far better. So let's go."

She was secretly a little nervous about it still, but at the same time pleased. Her eyes smiled as she stood by his side.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Through the park and up that hill," she said. "I will take you a pretty walk to the church."

In this manner they set out, going through the shady spaces of the park and climbing into the open country by way of a breezy hill. Then the downs spread before

them in silence and sunshine, with one small white cloud floating in a soft blue sky.

"There is Tullington," said Ailsa, pointing out a scattered hamlet afar, a few gray houses just distinguishable in a cluster of trees. "You can see the steeple of the church, peeping out from behind the trees. It's about four miles across the downs. We go this way." She turned towards the north.

They went forward in that direction, and after a while the path took a downward sweep, which soon hid Hilmerceux and Tullington from view. Then it began to climb again, leading them by undulating ways to a wild and beautiful expanse of downs, which stretched as far as the eye could see without sign of house or man, ending in a skyline that zigzagged up and down, and a glimpse of the Channel to the south.

"The downs are very wild about here," said Harry, looking about him.

"Yes; but we shall see Tullington again from the top of that big hill," said Ailsa. "The track leading over it is our way."

"The hill where the sheep are grazing?" he asked.

"Yes," said Ailsa.

It was on the steep upward curve of the great hill that they saw a shepherd, in the green solitude, watching his flock. He was an old man and lame—crippled with rheumatism, and he held himself upright by the help of his shepherd's crook and a stout ash stick. He was wearing a long dark cloak—a caped shepherd's coat of a bygone period—which covered his long thin form from head to foot and floated and flapped in the wind. As the two young people came up the slope he glanced at them beneath shaggy brows, and his deep-set eyes showed recognition of the girl. She nodded, and stopped to speak to him.

"Good afternoon, Jasper," she said.

"A gude day, lass, and to you, ma-aster," he responded, in a slow Sussex drawl. "Happen you've a'not seed my little grandma'ad Eve, hast you, Miss Ailsa? I'se wa'tin'

for my tea, which the little ma'ad usual bring about this time. As she asna browt it I shall 'ev to fetch 'um mysel."

"Leaving Gray Bob in charge of the flock?" said Ailsa, nodding towards the slope, where the sheep grazed in the care of a sheep-dog.

"Ay, he's to be trusted wed un. A gudish dog, Gray Bob, thow summat puffed up with pride. Dogs is like men in some ways, full of fulish vanity, though not given to swearing, profaneness, and drunkenness. There be dogs and dogs. I had 'un once 'at used to talk vid me—ah! that 'ee vud. He'd come and catch my coats in his mouth, and he'd say, he vud: 'Ho, Ma'aster, there be a ewe in sore trouble over yon hill by Black Patch, and vill you goo back and zee 'er?' Sure enow, there vud be. Ah, many a ewe did that dog save me in the lambin' season, so he did. A nottable dog! Hirondelle, I called un."

"After the swallows?" suggested Harry, with a smile.

"Fast he were as a swallow, but wiser—ah, far wiser." The shepherd threw a glance at Harry, then his gaze shifted back to Ailsa. "You've heered tell of old Hirondelle, Miss Ailsa, and how he saved your gra'andmother at Mouldering House forty years ago?"

"I heard a dog found her," said Ailsa, "but I didn't know it was called Hirondelle."

"Hirondelle it vur—what other dog could 'a done it?" said the shepherd. "T'vor the night of the great fog—a dreadful visitation of A'mighty God forty years back, and a most dismal sight to see! We've never had naught like it sin'. I'd lent Hirondelle to Will Fenton the day afore, and because it vor la'ambin' season man and dog slept together that night in the hut by the hurdles, near to Stump Bottom, on th' other side of the down. 'Twas in the dawn, just as the fog was lifting, that Will was awakened by old Hirondelle howling, down in the valley by Mouldering House. Will sat up drowsed, in the hut thick wi' gray fog, and it seemed to him Hirondelle was crying from the valley, just like a Christian—'Co'ome doon quick, you gurt grummut, and zee vot I've found.' So Will went down,

little thinking what he was to see. From the bottom Hiron-delle kept directing him with cries, for he was a dog of great sagacity of thought. And so it was Will came across his sweetheart, lying theer in Mouldering House, her pet-ticuts rumbled about her head to shut out sommut awful she must a' seen, for all the world like a soul swathed in a shroud. And Will, who was a strong young chap, carried her up and home in his arms, with Hiron-delle running alongside. Ah, to be sure he was a nottable wise dog, Hiron-delle, of much gude sense, and a knowledgeable, thinking head. I heered Will tell the story arterwards, smoking a serious pipe."

He fumbled for his own pipe, and went on:

"Ah, well, lass, your grandfa'ather has long since made his exit, and now your grandmother has followed him. 'Twas stra'ange he went by way of the sea, and him a man of the downs. But sea or downs, what does it matter? We must all meet the great and terrible God some day, and taste of brimstone by His most holy will, unless we be saved by the Son's grace. For most o' us be meshed in the wiles of sin, like fishes cotched in a net. And now I must be lukin' for my little grandma'ad Eve. Good day, Miss Ailsa, and you, young ma'aster. . . . I don't seem to 'a seen you on the downs afore. Who be you?"

In a low tone Ailsa told him. The aged dim eyes scanned the young man's face as he touched a withered forelock of hair. "I 'a been one of the Hilmerceux shepherds for sixty year," he mumbled.

"Sixty years? That is a long time," said Harry, with his winning smile. He slipped some silver into the old man's hand, and walked slowly on. The shepherd waited until he was out of earshot, and then cleared his throat and spoke to Ailsa in a cautious voice.

"I heered down in village that you'd gone to the gra'at house to live, Miss Ailsa. Well, you'd better mind your footsteps. I mind some strange tales of doings there in the old days. It's not a house for the likes of a young lass like you. Their ways are not your ways. I've heered

stories—ah, I've heered things I cannot tell you. So fight the good fight of faith, my girl, lay hold of eternal life. I was along by your cottage yester-morn, and I seed the rooks is main disturbed. I shouldn't be surprised if they went away. They're never caring for death, black though they be. Well, good-by, my lass—the young lord is waiting for ye."

He hobbled off down the slope, dragging himself along by his shepherd's crook and the stick, his long, faded cloak flapping around him as he walked. Ailsa caught up to Harry, who remarked, with a smile:

"Rather an interesting character, that old chap."

"Most shepherds are," returned the girl absently.

They topped the hill, and sheep and dog and the hobbling figure of the shepherd vanished from sight. On the other side of the hill sank into a shadowy hamlet, wrapped in solitude in the midst of the downs. A thread of a track ran down to it, becoming wider as the bottom was reached. There was a cluster of small houses peeping from trees, a large gray one overlooking the churchyard, and a stately old church between two great yews which was the object of their walk. Ailsa said she would go and get the key, and ran on ahead. In a moment or two Harry saw her coming towards him through the churchyard with the vicar, Mr. Adsell, a thin, dark man, whom Harry had met before. He hastened forward now, holding out his hand.

"Good afternoon, Lord Hilmerceux. Miss Rose tells me you have come to see the church."

He turned towards the door, but before unlocking it he had a word to say for the yews.

"I am very proud of them," he said, fitting the key into the lock. "They are hundreds of years old—some think as old as the church itself."

Harry looking at them, but, knowing nothing of yews, kept silence. The key grated in the heavy oaken door, and they entered the church.

One of the little group had never seen a church like this before. It silenced him as he looked around him at

the stained dark pillars, the shadowy arches, the lofty clerestory, and felt the old gray stones beneath his feet. Standing thus, he was conscious of the dignity of worship in such a setting, and seemed to glimpse that vision of inviolate sanctuary once enshrined in the troubled hearts of men. A shaft of subdued light, falling through stained glass, streamed like a revelation into the dim nave, touching the altar table with ultramarine, deep red and gold.

"Is it not a beautiful church?" whispered Ailsa to him, her young face alight with the glory of colored tones.

Mr. Adsell was beside them with chapter and verse.

"Here is a marble coffin slab, Lord Hilmerceux, which covers the remains of a thirteenth-century abbess, Lady Agatha Hilmerceux, the prioress of one of the early religious houses. There is an earlier slab in the chancel, by the site of the ancient lady chapel. Its coped shape and herring-bone fluting have been greatly admired by antiquaries. We are very proud of the church font—twelfth century, and all solid Sussex marble, central and angle shafts, as well as the base."

Harry moved slowly forward without reply. Knowing nothing of such things, he could not be stirred to rapture in them. He was surrounded by recumbent effigies in armor, and prone chiselled women with meekly crossed hands. The white walls were thick with brasses, and slabs with Latin inscriptions were at his feet. Looking down, he saw he was standing on the name of Hilmerceux cut deep in a blue slab beneath his right foot. He flushed deeply, like one caught in an improper act, and moved a step away. The voice of the vicar, at his elbow, broke the silence again.

"This is a fine monument of Richard, Lord Hilmerceux, who fell at the siege of Boullen, and his wife Margaret. Their seven children are kneeling behind their figures—the sons after the father, and the daughters after the mother. The seated figure a little distance away is Dulcibella, Lord Hilmerceux's second wife, who was one of the famous co-heiresses of Ashburn. The monument is surmounted by the Hilmerceux helmet and crests, and

it is regarded as a very excellent specimen of Renaissance work—restored, of course, but very carefully done.”

They walked round inspecting the monuments, and reading the mural inscriptions in brass and marble. Mr. Adsell had much to say about everything they looked at. Harry's attention soon wandered, but Ailsa listened with unwavering interest, and seemed greatly impressed to learn that the chancel arch was one of the few Norman chancel arches remaining in England to-day. The picture remained in Harry's mind: the dim church, and the girl and the clergyman examining its relics with rapt faces and a single mind. He had nothing in common with them here. He knew nothing of this time-hallowed English past which held them in thrall. The vicar's talk wearied him, but Ailsa vibrated like a sensitive instrument to every word. It did not help him that the clergyman was talking of his own ancestors buried there. What were dead ancestors buried in a church to one who had never heard of them a few weeks before? Such matters were the heritage of tradition and an upbringing on English soil. That birthright of an ancient house had been denied him. His early memories were of savage seas, Mother Carey's chickens and reeling decks with sharp winds humming through the shrouds. In this church, among the Hilmerceux tombs, he was a stranger and a looker-on. Ailsa, virginal, fair and English, hanging on the little vicar's words with reverence in her bright eyes, appeared far more in keeping with the place.

As these thoughts came to him the vicar drew final attention to an eleventh-century two-light window, and led the way from the church. Outside, his antiquarian zeal expanded, he beamed on Harry with a courtier's eye.

“You will join us at the Vicarage for tea, Lord Hilmerceux? Mrs. Adsell will be delighted.”

“Thank you, but another time, if you will excuse us,” rejoined the young man apologetically. “We have a long walk back across the downs, and it is getting late.”

The vicar shook hands with effusion, and regretted they

had to go so soon. Perhaps Miss Rose would not mind stepping across to the Vicarage with him then? He had promised to let Lady Hilmerceux have the list of hymns for next Sunday morning's service, which was to be fully choral, with an anthem of thanksgiving. The choir had been practising very hard for the service, which would be of a special nature.

"A very special service indeed!" murmured Mr. Adsell, with an arch glance, as he took Ailsa off to the Vicarage.

II

Harry waited alone in the churchyard. It seemed to him that it was steeped in the brooding spirit of the past even more intensely than the church. There was a silence in the green spot, encircled by downs, which held him almost in awe. He loitered among the mounds, looking at the headstones. And then, crossing the narrow path between the yews, his eyes fell on a slab of white marble with the name "William Fenton" carved upon it.

He paused before it, reading the faint inscription to one who had been drowned off the Cornish Coast. "A Faithful Servant and Humble Friend of the Hilmerceux family"—so the stone said. This, then, he reflected, was the grave of the man who had gone away with his grandfather forty years before. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." He saw the text without taking in its meaning, his mind dwelling on the strange story told by the old shepherd about the dog Hironnelle guiding Will Fenton to his unconscious sweetheart in Mouldering House after she had been wandering about the lonely downs through that night of terrible fog which had been a "visitation of A'mighty God and a most dismal sight to see. . . ."

The shepherd's reminiscence came to him in conjunction with Ailsa's story of her grandmother's death in the winter's storm, when the light gleamed from Mouldering House across the darkness of the downs, and the girl

was startled from sleep and a sinister dream to find her grandmother downstairs at the open door crying aloud in terror her husband's name.

Strange, and more than strange! No wonder Ailsa's eyes had shone with dread as she told him the story, and that she had shunned the ordeal of descending to Mouldering House. He felt a coldness run over him at the thought of it, as if he, too, were experiencing some after-taste of the girl's loneliness and fear. Well, Death held many secrets, and the grave had closed over an odd one in this green-gray spot, unless, indeed, it had been but the fantasy of a dying woman, haunted at the moment of death with the memory of a scene of fear and horror, forty years before. But Ailsa had seen the light as well.

He stood for a moment musing. A mellow ray of light, falling through the yew-tree's heavy shade, lingered for a moment on the bunches of violets and primroses which had been set in little receptacles along the grave and then crept up the stained marble to the last line of the inscription so recently added—"And in their death they were not divided."

Hearing a sound, he looked round, and saw Ailsa walking towards him from the gate. The same ray of sunshine which had fallen on the grave-stone lit up her face. He went to meet her as she came along the path.

The light was beginning to fade on the downs as they climbed back to Hilmerceux by way of the great hill, but there was still azure and gold in the sky overhead.

III

When the heir entered the drawing-room after dinner that evening Lady Hilmerceux was deep in thought. She gave him an affectionate smile, though inwardly she was a little perplexed. She had seen them return from their walk that afternoon, and it had set her thinking whether it was altogether advisable for such a handsome and youthful pair to be thrown so much together. Ailsa

was a charming girl, but Harry was on the threshold of his career, with the eyes of the county upon him. And he was a Hilmerceux too, though, she felt sure, without the taint. Still . . . it would be better for him to mingle more with girls of his own station in life. The time had come for that. She mentally conned a list as she looked towards him with a possessive air.

"Harry!" she said.

He glanced across, and came to where she sat.

"Yes?" he said.

"Sit down beside me, Harry." She patted the arm of a chair. "I have been turning over plans for the future in my mind for some days past, and I would like to talk them over with you. I am thinking of asking some people to the house." His eyes sought hers quickly.

"Why?" he said diffidently. "Do we need anyone? We are very happy here by ourselves."

"Very happy"—she echoed the words with a faint sigh—"but we should not forget that we both have duties to fulfil. I have been selfish, keeping you to myself for so long. It is advisable that you should know more young people in your own station of life, instead of being shut up here alone with only Ailsa and myself."

"As to that—" he began, but she held up her hand, and went on:

"I think of asking a few people here, Harry. That will be the best way of introducing you to the county. And I shall ask one or two from London as well—Dick Aldious for one, as I want you to meet him. He is a distant connection of mine. Will you help me to draw up a list?"

"I'm afraid I know nothing of such things," he said uncertainly. "Would it not be better to put it off for a little while yet? I am still so new to all this."

She shook her head. "No," she said, "it is quite time we began to entertain a little. Perhaps you had better leave it all in my hands this time."

"Thank you," he said with his easy smile, "I would much prefer to do so."

CHAPTER XV

THE HOUSE PARTY

I

Life and music came again to Hilmerceux. The house party was the social acceptance of the heir, but it was the out-of-door festivities which set the county simmering and brought the countryside in force to see the unexpected successor to the title from abroad enter upon his reign. There was a fête and a luncheon to the Hilmerceux tenants; a treat and field sports for the school-children. For these revels the park and gardens were thrown open; the heavens bestowed their blessing, and a Sussex sun beamed down with unusual warmth. Marquees were erected in park and meadow, and flags drooped from colored poles.

In these scenes Harry had to play his part, mingling with the invited and receiving congratulations which embarrassed him not a little, though he managed to smile and utter a simple word of thanks. Lady Hilmerceux, who was with him, accepted the greetings with the dignity which was hers by natural right. She moved among the company like a woman transfigured, with the dark and graceful young man at her side. And her joy of the moment was shared by her guests. The occasion was hailed as the opening of the great house again: the revival of the good old times in which the countryside would share. That sentiment was felicitously expressed by the curate, who assembled the children on the sward in two rows to cheer the new Lord Hilmerceux who had come to live in their midst. The new lord had to speak a few words to the children in response, though he would have preferred the rigour of a typhoon in Chinese Seas.

At night there was music and singing, with fireworks on

the lawn. A pale moon looked wistfully down on the illuminated gardens and the return of light and happiness to the old house.

The county at large approved of the new Lord Hilmerceux, perhaps because he bore his dignity with diffidence, yet looked the part. But the house party was the chief thing: intended to mold him for the future in the company of his equals—the social mellowing of him, as it were. A finished manner and the bearing of birth and tradition—these qualities Lady Hilmerceux looked to the intimate association to impart. The house party was to help in his education for the more delicate art of life. So the guests came.

II

On lawn and terrace the company were gathered this afternoon, the young people at tennis, the older folk in shady spots, drinking tea. Lady Hilmerceux, cup in hand, was sitting with Lady Alwyn, the Honorable Agatha Peacock, and Mrs. Fredcroft. Lady Alwyn, large and florid, leant back, nodding drowsily in the agreeable depth of her chair; Miss Peacock, thin and long of face, talked in nonchalant fashion with her hostess, an eye aslant for the tennis and the heir. Mrs. Fredcroft listened in silence. She was an extremely wealthy widow, tall and pretentious, and very proud to be included in the house party, for she hoped to marry her daughters well. Ruth and Cecily Fredcroft were nice and pretty girls. They had joined the tennis players.

Just beyond the group of chairs bulked the figure of Major Chillington, M. F. H., stout and red of face, with the light of sport in his eye, watching the tennis also. He put down his cup on the grass, and applauded a stroke in the nearest court.

“By Jove, Fieldhurst,” he said, “your daughter plays a topping game!”

Sir Hilary Fieldhurst, deep in conversation with the

vicar, raised eyes which rested on Major Chillington without expression, nodded vaguely, and returned to his talk about antiquarian remains. But Lady Hilmerceux's eyes were drawn towards the court where Harry and a tall fair girl were playing together. She watched them gravely, her mind, as ever, preoccupied with the future and his career. She was pleased with him, though she would have liked him to show a deeper interest in his heritage, to take the reins of management more vigorously into his hands while Radford was there to teach him the way. Still, it was all so new to him. The interest would grow with time and the increase of responsibility.

She foresaw a great career for him, a happy future for the house. Watching him now with loving eyes, she told herself that he, thank God! would break with the old régime—with the long line of voluptuaries and sensualists who had held sway at Hilmerceux in the past. He had the blood, but he had been brought up outside the tradition. . . . Perhaps—fervently she hoped it—he had escaped, despite his resemblance to one whose shameful memory had tortured her secret love for forty long years. But she must look to the future now. That, at least, was not marred. It would be best for Harry to marry soon, so as to settle the problem of succession. It was of the highest importance that there should be an heir. An heir! Violet Fieldhurst was a beautiful girl, with birth and money too. Yes, it would make an excellent marriage in every way. Harry could not do better, and she would like him to marry in the county. So ran her thoughts.

Some of the players sauntered from the courts for tea; three or four pretty girls and as many young men in flannels, all self-possessed and modern, at ease with life and themselves. There were Ruth and Cecily Fredcroft, Margery Lorne, who was Major Chillington's ward, young Alwyn, Lady Alwyn's grandson and heir, Arthur Fieldhurst and a friend of his, Eddie Landon by name.

Violet Fieldhurst and Harry followed in the wake of this group, walking more slowly. Lady Hilmerceux was

pleased to see them thus. She welcomed them with a smile.

"I hope you have all enjoyed your game," she said, looking around her.

"Oh, Miss Fieldhurst beat me like a champion," said Harry, smiling back at her.

Cecily Fredercroft, seventeen, fair, and long-legged, looked up.

"Our set wasn't so bad," she said, "but Billy cheated—he always does."

William Alwyn, stretched at length on a bamboo chair, laughed lazily.

"A woman's way of explaining defeat," was his rejoinder.

"If you think I can't take a beating I'll play you again after tea, and show you who's the better player!"

"No more tennis for me," rejoined the youth. "It's really an effeminate game. After tea I'm going to have a row on that jolly cool lake."

Violet Fieldhurst joined the group.

"There's some one coming across the lake now. Who is it, Cecily?"

Cecily shook her head.

"I cannot see. Have a look, Billy?"

Young Alwyn, sitting erect to receive a proffered cup of tea, looked downward across the lawns.

"Dick Aldious for one," he said, "Dick and——"

"Mr. Aldious and Miss Rose," broke in Margery Lorne. "I can see them quite plainly."

Lady Hilmerceux beckoned to a footman, and sent for a fresh supply of tea. Ailsa, dressed in white, and wearing a shady hat, came up the slope with a tall, fair-haired young man. The girl looked about her a little timidly, like one not quite at ease in the company. Her escort surveyed the scattered group with a kind of humorous aloofness before speaking to his hostess.

"I'm sorry if we are late," he said, "but the fault is mine alone. I kept Miss Rose from her tea while we had a

look at the Place of Watch, which I haven't seen for years."

Cecily Fredcroft turned bright eyes on the speaker.

"The Place of Watch—where is that?" she asked.

Arthur Fieldhurst, helping himself to cake, vaguely explained.

"It's the old stone building beyond the lake, in the elbow of the carriage drive. You can read about it in the British Museum, if you ever go there. Historical and traditional—all that kind of thing."

"What's inside it?" Cecily asked Ailsa.

"It's kept locked," Ailsa replied. "We just looked through the grille."

"I had a look through this morning," said Arthur, "trying by the—what d'ye call it—the mind's eye, to bring back the past."

"Well done, Arthur!" said William Alwyn. "Come, you will gladden your father's heart by entering the Church yet."

"Oh, I say, I hope it didn't sound so bad as that," said the youth, casting an eye at the vicar's unconscious back; "but I tell you it's a jolly weird place."

Violet Fieldhurst laughed.

"We'll have to bring Father into this," she said.

"Father"—she raised her voice—"Arthur is trying to tell us about the Place of Watch."

At this abrupt intrusion into his conversation with the vicar, Sir Hilary lifted blinking eyes towards his daughter.

"Can you tell us about the Place of Watch, Father?" she asked.

"Why is it called that?" asked Cecily suddenly.

"It takes its name from the time a family retainer watched there when the head of the house was on the point of death," explained Sir Hilary. "The death was signalled from the house by a light if it occurred at night, or by a drawn blind in the daytime. It was the duty of the retainer, on receiving the signal, to alter the hands of

the clock in the Place of Watch. I think that is right, Lady Hilmerceux?"

He looked towards his hostess, who had joined the group of young people, and was listening. She bowed her head.

"Such used to be the family custom. It has been abandoned for many years now."

"A pity that such a traditional observance should have fallen into disuse!" remarked the vicar, drawing near.

"What was the clock for?" asked Margery Lorne breathlessly.

"To mark the time of death," said Sir Hilary. "After doing this, the retainer remained in the Place of Watch until the night of the funeral. The Hilmerceux in former days buried their dead at midnight. As the cortège wound down the drive the retainer would appear at the grille, stop it with uplifted hand, and ask: 'Does my lord go by?' And the reply, from the new head of the house, would be: 'Yes, for the time has run.' On hearing these words the servitor would lock the Place of Watch again, and it remained locked until the time came for the next head of the house to die."

Cecily clapped her hands.

"What a lovely creepy place! I should like to go in. May I, Lady Hilmerceux?"

"So should I," said Arthur jauntily.

The hostess looked at her two young guests with a half smile.

"Would you? It is rather a gloomy place, and has been closed for many years. Still, if you wish to see inside it, the steward has the key." She hesitated a moment, then looked round. "Ailsa, my dear, will you go to Mr. Radford——"

"No, no, Cecily, you do not want to go into the Place of Watch." The speaker was Violet Fieldhurst. She had noticed Lady Hilmerceux's hesitation, and guessed the reason. "Why, you silly child, you would be dreaming all night!"

"According to tradition, it's an unlucky thing to do," said Sir Hilary gravely.

"Oh, if it's unlucky I don't want to go," said the girl. "Come, Billy, I'll play you another set!"

The young people broke up into small groups and moved off, most of them towards the nets. Harry and Violet walked down the slope together, and Lady Hilmerceux's eyes followed them with approval from her chair. She thought they made a handsome pair: the girl with her fair English beauty, the slim and dark-skinned heir. In the still, golden afternoon she dreamed and planned, picturing them wedded, and with children there. She passed Violet's qualifications in review, and they stood the test of her fastidious scrutiny well. Birth, beauty, and money: a better county match could not be made. The sooner it was arranged the better for the question of succession and the future of the house. The Hilmerceux inheritance was a matter of such importance that it brooked no delay. Harry must be shown the direction of his duty without loss of time, though inclination might well go with duty here. Meantime she was conscious of a desire to discuss the important consideration with the trusted legal adviser, who was a guest of the house party. She beckoned to a passing servant.

"Mr. Lemartine, Charles—do you know where he is?"

"In Mr. Radford's room, my lady. I served tea to them there."

"Tell him I would like to see him here—when he is disengaged."

The footman departed, but returned to say that Mr. Lemartine had accompanied the steward to the park to look at some timber a little while before. Should he go for him there? Lady Hilmerceux waved the man away.

"No," she said. "He is sure to come back this way."

She sank back to her dreams in the solitude of the lawn, content that the lawyer and the steward should be planning and contriving for Hilmerceux too. The old house was

fortunate in having two such men, discreet and invaluable, devoted to its service. And they worked for the future also.

III

In the deep serenity of the park the steward pointed about him to the trees.

"Too thick," he said emphatically, "far too thick. They've wanted thinning for years."

The stick in his hand waved a circle as he spoke. He and Mr. Lemartine stood in a deep leafy glade through which the spring sunshine could not find a way: a thick growth of bronze-gray trunks festooned with creepers and trailing green. In the greenish twilight of the spot the lawyer surveyed the fine trees, and wondered how many human generations some of them had seen. There were oaks with the dignity of centuries.

"Some of this undergrowth would be better cleared away," he said.

"Useless unless the trees are thinned as well," rejoined the steward. "These beaches now! To my mind they should all come down."

With his open hand he slapped a slim trunk of silver-green—one of a small dense group. Mr. Lemartine inspected them with a considering eye.

"A little thinning might be judicious—as you say. Have you spoken to Lady Hilmerceux?"

"I am speaking to you first. If you're of my way of thinking, Lady Hilmerceux will probably agree."

In the dim space Mr. Lemartine's eyes ranged over near and distant groups of trees.

"A noble park," he murmured, "with many a tradition attached to it. Really, it seems a pity to fell a single tree."

"An oak-park, though," was the dry rejoinder. "There is no tradition about the beech and ash, which are only choking better trees. I'm not thinking of touching the oaks."

He walked to a great oak as he spoke, examining the knotted trunk with expert eye. Mr. Lemartine thought the steward had something of the gray enduring quality of the tree as he stood there, tearing away a dark and drooping mass of ivy from the lower limbs. Thus engaged, Radford spoke again.

"The thinning should start from the lake—on the far side of the bridge—and run down to the Queen's Tree."

"The Queen's Tree?" the lawyer repeated. "I've forgotten where it is. Somewhere between the bridge and the belt of trees near the coppice, isn't it?"

"Over there." The steward, stepping away from the oak, pointed down a long dim corridor of green.

"Do you see that oak with branches trailing on the ground? That is the Queen's Tree."

Mr. Lemartine looked in the distance and beheld it; an old, massive oak on whose low branches tradition said that an English Queen, visiting Hilmerceux, had put aside regal dignity to sit swinging and laughing through the drowsy hours of a summer afternoon. As Mr. Lemartine glanced at it his eye unexpectedly chanced upon two figures, walking close, who had crossed the far end of the dim avenue of green to vanish into the whispering solitude of the wood. The lawyer's sight was not good, but he thought he recognized the young man. He glanced at Radford. The steward's face showed neither curiosity nor surprise. The eyes of the two men met. Mr. Lemartine spoke at the prompting of a hidden thought.

"You had better consult Lord Hilmerceux about the thinning of the park trees," he said thoughtfully. "The old order passes, Mr. Radford. We have been doing things our own way so long that we are apt to forget it—you and I. But there is a new head of the house. We shall do well to bear that in mind."

The steward gave him a straight glance.

"And did you think that I had forgotten it?" he said, in rather a dry tone. After a moment's silence he went on: "I have asked for his instructions in this matter. Lord

Hilmerceux says he does not understand such things. He told me I'd better talk it over with you."

"Oh!" murmured the lawyer. He turned this speech over in his mind, but could make nothing of it. "I know little of the welfare of parks either, so I prefer to leave the decision to you. You're the practical man of affairs here, Radford, and know best what to do. Why ask a mere layman's advice? It would be ill-fitting on my part, after all these years, to think of offering you guidance in the practical management of the estate."

Radford said nothing to this, but nodded his head in a preoccupied way. Twisting his stick in his hand, he spoke of something else.

"Have you seen the new wall garden?" he said. "Jordan suggested it. He used that stretch of old wall by the garden house at the end of the rose garden."

"A wall garden sounds pleasant," remarked the lawyer. "I should like to see it."

They left the park and crossed the bridge, making their way back through the gardens which on that side of the lake stretched down to the water's edge. By upward paths which led past flower-beds, glowing with color, they reached the new garden, already covered with flowering creepers trailing over the banked-up slope of a low gray wall. Mr. Lemartine observed it with discerning eye, remarking that it beat a rock garden for getting the best effects of the early flowers of spring. "Upon my word, the wall holds moisture well," he said. "I suppose the banking-up accounts for that."

The steward nodded his head.

"In part," he said, "but the stone is soft and porous, and retains moisture. The wall had crumbled away so that I thought it would have to be taken away."

"Ah, this is much better," approved the lawyer.

"So I think," was the reply.

A footman approached them along the flagged path and stopped before Mr. Lemartine.

"Lady Hilmerceux has been asking for you, Sir," he said.

"Where is she?" the lawyer inquired.

"On the terrace lawn, sir."

"Tell Lady Hilmerceux I will come at once."

As the man went away Mr. Lemartine asked the steward if he were returning to the house. "We had better fix up about that grazing lease," he went on. "Lady Hilmerceux is not likely to detain me long."

Radford said he would follow, but wanted to speak to the gardener first. Mr. Lemartine turned across the grass to make his way to the terrace lawn by the side of a high clipped hedge which divided the rose garden from the wall garden and adjoining lawn. He had only taken a step or two in that direction when the clear note of a woman's voice on the other side of the hedge pierced the quiet stillness of the air.

"Yes, it's pretty plain what is going on there. Lady Hilmerceux had better take care."

Mr. Lemartine halted where he stood. Glancing cautiously through the dark yew hedge, he caught a glimpse of the faces of three ladies on the other side, set, as if it were, in a leafy frame. They were Lady Alwyn, Agatha Peacock, and Mrs. Fredcroft, sauntering in the rose garden in the soft evening air. For the moment they had come to a standstill by the herbaceous border, so as to give Lady Alwyn, who was short in the wind, an opportunity to regain her breath. The lawyer could hear her panting decorously now, quite oblivious of the proximity of his listening ear.

"She is rather pretty. Who is she?"

The question was asked in Miss Peacock's acidulated tones. Through the dark leaves Mr. Lemartine saw the movement of her pursed prim lips. Lady Alwyn, between pants, furnished the reply.

"No one knows, my dear. She's just a whim of Lady Hilmerceux's, who took her from a lonely cottage on the

downs, so I'm told. The girl lived there with her grandmother, a shepherd's widow—something like that."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Fredcroft uttered this ejaculation in a shocked voice. Mr. Lemartine saw her put up her glass, scanning something in the distance invisible to him on this side of the hedge. "What a strange thing for Lady Hilmerceux to do!"

"I wish I had her protégée's complexion," said Lady Alwyn, in a decided voice.

"She has nice manners, too—quite an air." Miss Peacock was speaking now. "Lovely eyes, also. Do you know, I always was sweet on that tint of Greuze blue. And she looks like a good girl to me—that I must say."

On the distant side of the hedge the florid features of Lady Alwyn creased in a plump smile.

"My dear, most girls are good until they are tempted by inclination. That's why it is always best to keep them out of harm's way."

The ladies moved a little more into the hedge's shade.

The lawyer saw Mrs. Fredcroft's scandalized glance at this last remark, and a brown mole on Agatha's long and scraggy neck became prominent to his view. He glanced about him uneasily, not much caring for his part of involuntary listener there. Behind him he observed the figure of the steward, walking slowly towards him on the invisible side of the hedge. Mr. Lemartine wondered if the whole of this conversation was audible to him too. The ladies spoke with a disconcerting loudness, and their voices carried clearly in the quiet air. Mr. Lemartine regretted that Radford was there. On the other side of the hedge the voice of Agatha broke the silence again:

"In that case, what is this girl doing at Hilmerceux, then?"

The sardonic implication of this remark was not lost on Lady Alwyn. She shrugged fat shoulders, and by her laugh it was quite apparent that she had recovered her wind. Then she spoke.

"My dear, Lady Hilmerceux is rather eccentric, after

living so long alone. First, she keeps this great place shut up for ten years. Then she suddenly takes this girl under her wing, and after that, she discovers an heir in the blue. There is no doubt about the heir, though—you can take my word for that. He is an Hilmerceux through and through—the image of that handsome scamp his grandfather, whom I remember very well. He was drowned off Cornwall during a fishing trip. They say he went away because of some scandal, though I never heard what it was. A woman, of course—trust a Hilmerceux for that! After his death a surreptitious wife turned up with a son—*this* boy's father. Very different from the grandfather, except in the one thing—women. He had the family weakness there. A man of little account, who ended up by marrying a village girl of dubious character—a cottage girl, or something like that. Shall we walk as far as the garden house?"

To Mr. Lemartine's relief the ladies resumed their walk, and he was free to go his own way. Skirting cautiously the narrow strip of lawn, where the dark-bordered hedge fell away, he emerged from the screened path into a garden path, which led across to the sloping lawns. Looking behind him, he could no longer see Radford's figure in the rear. The steward had turned off to the house by another way. The lawyer continued along the garden path, deep in thought.

IV

Coming out upon the lawn, he observed Lady Hilmerceux seated in her chair some distance away, a solitary figure in the calm evening air. She saw him and beckoned with her hand from the shady awning in which she reclined. He crossed the lawn and sat down beside her, but she did not immediately speak. She lay back, sunk in some mild reverie of thought, a slanting ray of sunlight quivering on the white hand which rested on the side of the chair. At length she looked up.

"This has been a happy day, Lemartine."

"I am glad you have found it so," was his response.

He waited for her to say why she had sent for him, but she seemed to resume communion with her inward thoughts. His own mind was busy with what he had overheard, so he kept silent also, pondering over the malicious interference of Lady Alwyn's words.

As the lawyer sat there looking across the lawn, the figures of two young people came into his view, crossing the old gray bridge which spanned the lake. It was not until they had climbed the slope and reached the spot where the sunshine dappled through the branches of the great mulberry tree on the shorn surface of the lawn that he saw who they were. Recognizing them now, he regarded them with new eyes. Up the slope they came slowly, the heir, and Ailsa with him, and Mr. Lemartine had no doubt now that they were the two he had seen at a distance by the Queen's Tree in the park. They walked engrossed in themselves, without thought or glance for the two chairs higher up the lawn. They made a wonderful pair, Mr. Lemartine thought, the boy with his grandfather's looks and grace, the girl with the dainty charm of a figure on a fan. Harry bent over Ailsa and whispered something in her ear. She lifted quick smiling eyes to his, but as quickly looked down again. She was close enough for Mr. Lemartine to see the long uplifted lashes of her eyes, the transparent blue beneath. He saw her look too. . . .

Mr. Lemartine turned his head towards the neighboring chair, wondering whether its occupant had caught that uplifted glance. Lady Hilmerceux had seen the young couple approach, but her gaze was for Harry alone. Seemingly she had no thought for the girl by his side, nor of what might be happening there. The lawyer marvelled at such blindness, though his own eyes had been opened but a few minutes before. But then (as he testily told himself afterwards) women were quicker at such things than men, because sex was the business of their lives. With the past to guide her Lady Hilmerceux should have been more on her guard than to throw these two so much

together: the boy of Hilmerceux blood, this girl with virginal eyes and flying color, and soft tender lips.

Harry stopped beside Lady Hilmerceux's chair.

"We're just off to the billiard-room. We've a four-handed game before dinner, and I'm teaching Ailsa to play."

Lady Hilmerceux looked up at him.

"Don't let me keep you, then."

He smiled, and went on; Ailsa had already gone ahead. Lady Hilmerceux watched them until they vanished across the terrace, then turned to her companion.

"Even now I can hardly believe it is true."

He nodded, divining her thought, while his mind pursued his own. She added, after a pause:

"I sent for you to tell you something. I would like Harry to marry Violet Fieldhurst."

Her words were so unexpected that he was at a loss for an immediate reply. She turned in her chair and looked at him.

"A very suitable match, don't you think?"

"Most suitable indeed!" Gravely he pondered his next words, then uttered them slowly: "Is Lord Hilmerceux acquainted with your wish? Does he understand this?"

"Not yet—I have said nothing, so far." She smiled easily into his cautious face. "But I have quite made up my mind, and I shall lose no time. The sooner the better, in fact, for the succession must be made sure. Sir Hilary Fieldhurst will welcome the alliance, and Violet is a beautiful girl. I wanted to let you know so that you can have settlements prepared. I shall settle half my fortune on Harry when the marriage is arranged. You might get the papers ready. Now I am going indoors."

She had risen from her chair while speaking, and she turned away now without another word. With wrinkled brow he watched her go. It was like her, he thought, to dispose of this business in an impetuous way, as if the marriage were settled and done with, and she alone concerned. But there were other issues at stake here: issues

which gave cause for foreboding, and perhaps a little alarm. It might be his unpleasant imperative task to enlighten her before long, if she did not detect the complication for herself. Meantime, legal caution prompted him to hold his own counsel, but keep a watchful eye on the progress of affairs.

CHAPTER XVI

WITHIN AND WITHOUT

I

The night was dark and warm outside, and windless on the downs. Inside, there was light and laughter, and the click of billiard balls downstairs. There were cards and dancing in the music-room, where the doors stood wide, and talk in the great drawing-room. Here Lady Hilmerceux sat, with Violet Fieldhurst by her side, and the Fredcroft girls were in this group too. But most of the young people were elsewhere. In a corner Lady Alwyn raked over the ashes of forgotten scandals with Major Chillington. On a lounge, Agatha Peacock and the vicar's wife discussed the Women's Institute and the low ebb of village morals. Mrs. Fredcroft seated at a table alone turned over the pages of a book of engravings.

The door opened, and Eddie Landon, a pink-faced youth in perfect condition, appeared with the intention of carrying off the young people to some more active form of gaiety downstairs. He looked round him, and his eye sought the Fredcroft girls.

"Billy's got a new game," he announced. "He calls it Chinese pool; it's a kind of cross between billiards and mah jong. A topping game! We want two or three more. Comin'?"

The Fredcroft girls rose abruptly. Ruth looked towards the girl who sat with her hostess.

"Are you coming to the billiard room, Violet?" she asked.

Violet shook her head.

"No, thank you: I'll stay here."

The others went off, and she settled back in her chair to resume her talk with Lady Hilmerceux. She was a handsome girl, with Saxon coloring and hair, and a rather romantic temperament, which found little play in her own home. Her widowed father was too much absorbed in antiquarian pursuits to bother his head much about his daughter, who in consequence led rather a lonely life. She had been glad of the invitation to Hilmerceux to meet the heir, whose arrival had set the whole county talking, and now, after a week within the walls of the old house which looked out on the downs she gathered the real reason why she had been asked there. Nothing had been said by her hostess, of course, but her hopes had been made clear enough in a more subtle and feminine way, and Violet was aware of them.

The thought was running through her fair head now. The knowledge that Lady Hilmerceux wished her to become mistress of Hilmerceux was rather intoxicating to her. For all her romantic disposition she was aware of the material and social advantages of such a match—they were so obvious! Of course she was an heiress, but money did not mean much here. The heir of Hilmerceux, by reason of his social position and ancient name, might have looked higher than herself in his search for a bride, yet the prize was within her reach, as far as Lady Hilmerceux was concerned; was held out to her, in fact.

She found herself thinking of the heir, and wondering what his feelings towards her really were. She was herself partly in love with him without being aware of it. The origins of her feelings could easily be understood. At home it was her lot to act as her father's hostess to groups of withered archæologists, who were too old to take any interest in her sex except in the form of excavated remains. On these ancients she was compelled to waste her youth, dreaming vague unsatisfying dreams of love. Then came the visit to Hilmerceux, and the confrontation with the dark and slim boy who was the bearer of a great name.

She had fallen in love with him at sight—at least, with his good looks. The feeling persisted. Her pulses beat faster as she thought of him now. . . .

She could make allowance for his slight shortcomings in his new part. He would shed these gaucheries in time, as he became more accustomed to his different environment, and, after all, he was a Hilmerceux of Hilmerceux. Nothing could alter that. But was she wholly content to marry him? Shadows lurked in the brilliant alliance—the shadow of a dark inheritance. “He is his grandfather come to life again, my dear. You should see the portrait in the picture gallery upstairs.” Lady Alwyn had told her this, with a knowing nod of her malicious old head, quite unaware that the tall, fair girl with the quiet gray eyes knew all about the tradition of Hilmerceux men, and of this grandfather in particular. Already she was beginning to count the cost. The evil repute of the dead man survived in the memory of people yet alive, as scandal will. Violet had heard of their family failing. Reckless and passionate lovers—charming and tender too—but destroyers of female peace, and sadly lacking as husbands. So the Hilmerceux reputation ran. Was the present one like his ancestors? She hoped not.

As the girl reflected, Lady Hilmerceux, sitting beside her, was telling her of the homecoming of the heir, and of her own great joy. The words of her hostess were a mark of special intimacy, and Violet felt them to be so. The subject chimed in with her secret thoughts, and ran with the current of her mind, enabling her to listen and think at the same time, uttering occasionally a brief word of comment as the occasion seemed to require. Wondering now, a little dreamily, about Harry and the traditional instincts of Hilmerceux men, a sudden fancy took possession of her. When Lady Hilmerceux ceased speaking she turned to her and said:

“Lady Hilmerceux, may I see the picture gallery upstairs?”

“Certainly dear.” The answering smile seemed to

probe the girl's thoughts. "Come, I will take you there."

Together they left the room and proceeded upstairs. On reaching the first landing they encountered Harry, hurrying down.

"Harry!" said Lady Hilmerceux.

He came to a standstill as he looked at them, but Violet had the idea that he seemed a trifle uncomfortable at meeting them just then. Lady Hilmerceux spoke.

"Violet wants to see the picture gallery, dear. Will you take her?"

Watching him Violet thought she saw a faint line of embarrassment wrinkle his brow, but it passed in a flash. Then he spoke suavely.

"I shall be delighted, Miss Fieldhurst. Are you not coming, aunt?"

"No; I am rather tired."

She left them together, going downstairs. With a ready smile Harry turned to the girl at his side.

"Will you come with me, Miss Fieldhurst?"

She glanced covertly at him as they walked, unable to rid herself of the impression that he regretted their chance encounter on the stairs. But his handsome young face, outlined like a cameo against the dark panelling of the wall, told her nothing. They reached the end of the corridor and the picture gallery. He switched on the light and they went in.

In silence he walked beside her, as they went the round of the long line of pictures on the walls. Her comments on the portraits revealed some understanding of the artists and their work, but they elicited faint response from her companion. Apparently the pictures of his ancestors held little attraction for him just then. Rather piqued, she touched him on the arm.

"Will you show me your grandfather's portrait? I am told you resemble him very much."

He stopped suddenly and gave her a quick glance. Then he threw a look round the gallery.

"It is over there I think," he rejoined.

They went and stood before it, and she looked at the portrait with critical eyes.

"Indeed it is a most striking likeness," she said. Then, musingly, "but the portrait has a look of—of evil, which you haven't got." She broke off abruptly. "But, oh, I should not have said that!"

"There is no reason why you shouldn't," he said smiling. "I don't mind how you criticize these ancestors of mine. In fact, I am not at all interested in this picture or its resemblance to myself. It strikes me as a bit uncanny—like looking at your own ghost. Others, apparently, have felt that way about it too."

The smile faded from his lips. Again he seemed ill at ease, glancing restlessly about the great room, as if anxious for her to come away. She lingered, asking him questions as she looked at the pictures. A Lely, surely, that half-length? Was this the famous Gainsborough? And what was the meaning of the painting by Kneller of a Hilmerceux on a white horse, with one arm upraised, making a vow to a sky-blue heaven thickly powdered with gold?

On such matters he could not enlighten her, for—as he said—he knew less of these works of art than herself. And in this fashion they strolled round the gallery, and at length reached the door. She smiled up at him as they passed out.

"Thank you for showing me the pictures," she said, "though I should not have detained you from your other guests so long."

"That does not matter at all," he replied with such studied politeness that the blood rose in her face. "But I'm afraid I'm a very bad guide. I ought to have warned you that my ancestors are quite new to me."

"I know," she answered softly, "but it was very good of you to show them to me."

"It was a pleasure, Miss Fieldhurst."

His eyes she thought, had most part in his smile—like the portrait. And indeed he looked very like the portrait then.

"But I should not have kept you so long," she went on. "And I promised Father to go to the library before bedtime and take some notes from the Hilmerceux manuscripts which Lady Hilmerceux has lent to him. He is going to write about them."

"Shall I take you there now?"

"Thank you."

They went downstairs. Violet's thoughts were busy with the heir who had come to Hilmerceux so unexpectedly, in ignorance of the heritage which awaited him there. And what a heritage! Her glance lingered on panelled interiors, lofty rooms, and gleaming corridors, all steeped in the hallowed tones of time. And it was all his—this dark-eyed boy who walked at her side. To him belonged the mellowed spaciousness and sombre beauty of this ancient home of his race. Whom would he choose to share it with him? Her heart beat a little faster at that thought. Imagination carried her away, until, with a shock, she recalled his aloofness in the gallery upstairs. She would have liked to talk to him now, but the words would not come. She did not know that his own silence just then was partly due to awkwardness: timidity in an unaccustomed part, and shyness of the tall, slim girl beside him, whose white shoulders gleamed like marble above her shimmering dress.

II

In the large library with the gallery and reading recesses three elderly figures sat in padded ease, remote from the gaiety and music. The vicar and Violet's father pondered ancient manuscripts at a table not far from the door; Mr. Lemartine was reading at the other end of the room, hard by a curtained window, which looked out on the downs. Into the palpable silence the young people entered. No one looked up to see who it was. Violet crossed the room to her father's side.

"I am sorry to be late, Father," she said.

Sir Hilary lifted a preoccupied face.

"Late—what for?" he asked.

He was an insignificant parent to have such a statuesque daughter—a little meager shrimp of a man, with faded eyes dimmed by a lifetime's poring over ancient documents, effigies, mediæval brasses, seals, sepulchral urns, and Roman and British remains. As an archæologist of distinction he wore blue glasses, and insisted on his letters being addressed "East Bourne," to the great confusion of the postal authorities, who sometimes sent them on to all kinds of unlikely places, or returned them marked, "Address Unknown." Sir Hilary was proud of the fact that his family had been settled in Sussex for centuries. Another branch of the family in Kent spelt the name "Fieldherst," but Sir Hilary disclaimed kinship because he could find no warranty for the additional "e." In support of this contention Sir Hilary had written various articles in archæological journals, pointing out that the name was spelt "Fieldhurst" in one of the returns of the Battle of Agincourt, in which a certain Hilary Fieldhurst had fought with great distinction at the head of a retinue of Sussex men, under Lord Camoys.

"I promised to take notes for you about the Hilmerceux manuscripts," his daughter said.

He shook his head.

"I forgot about it, Violet. There is such a priceless mine here that I do not know where to start—actually. Adsell, cast your eye over this script? In the handwriting of Alexius—beyond doubt! And the Imperial purple ink too."

The vicar, beetling brows and Roman nose bent over a Roman glass inkpot, nodded without looking up.

"Wonderful, indeed, my dear Sir Hilary! I have seen it before. What is your opinion of that Armenian illuminated manuscript—I do not mean the folio, but the thick duodecimo?"

"For my part I prefer the Aztec. I wonder how it came into the possession of the family? There are not

many manuscripts of the ancient literature of America in existence. I must ask Lady Hilmerceux. If——”

“If you do not need me, Father, I think I will go upstairs,” Violet interposed.

Sir Hilary turned from the manuscripts to his daughter, and laid his magnifying glass down.

“I beg your pardon, Violet, what were you saying? Ah! good evening, Lord Hilmerceux.”

The vicar looked up from his inkpot and nodded to the young people with a smile.

“You have some priceless treasures here, Lord Hilmerceux”—his hand indicated the manuscripts which lay deep on the table.

“Priceless, indeed!” echoed Sir Hilary. “There is a wonderful rolled Pentateuch here which would be very difficult to duplicate.

“I am afraid I know very little about such things,” observed Harry.

“A lifelong study for a recluse,” remarked the vicar, “but you, if I may say so, have other and more important things to do.”

“Lord Hilmerceux has been showing me the picture gallery upstairs,” Violet said.

“You were in good hands, then,” said Mr. Adsell, with a courtly air.

“The picture gallery!” said Sir Hilary. “There used to be a collection of Cissbury flints and a British skull, with a Roman spear in it, kept in a case there. Do you know if they are there still?”

Harry smiled with amused indifference. He looked to Violet as if for information. She met his look with an answering smile, but before she could speak there came a slight sound from the end of the room. They both looked round, and saw a girl at the open window, parting the curtains with her hands. She stepped quickly through, and the long thick curtains fell noiselessly, hiding the darkness of the night again. It was Ailsa.

In an unforgettable flash Violet’s mind registered the

scene—the deep room, the swaying curtains, and the figure of the girl standing there uncertainly, as if dazzled by the light. And she saw that she was startled and a little breathless as well.

“I didn’t know anyone was here,” she faltered. “I saw the window open and the room alight, so I came through, because . . . because . . .”

Harry was looking at her. He, too, had seen her startled look. He went towards her quickly, one hand outstretched.

“Ailsa!” he cried. “What is it? Has anything happened to you?”

She passed her hand across her eyes, then smiled into his face.

“No . . . at least, not much. I was rather frightened just now.”

“Frightened—by what?” he asked.

“I thought I heard a noise in the Place of Watch,” she murmured.

The words caught Sir Hilary’s ears. He got up from his place at the table, glancing at the girl.

“The Place of Watch?” he echoed. “Have you been down there alone?”

Ailsa gave him a quick look, then her eyes sought Harry’s again. There was silence for a moment. When Ailsa spoke again she had recovered her self-control.

“Yes,” she said quietly, “I was down there alone when I heard the sound. It frightened me a little, so I ran quickly back to the house.”

“What kind of a sound?” asked Sir Hilary.

Ailsa hesitated.

“A kind of scraping sound,” she said.

“Like a gate?” suggested Mr. Lemartine, who had come near.

“Yes,” she said quickly, “like a gate—a heavy gate being opened or shut.”

“The iron grille—if opened—would go with a creak,” said Mr. Adsell, adjusting his glasses.

Mr. Lemartine heard this in silence. Then he said:

"We had better get the key and see if anyone has been there."

"Where is the key kept?" Harry questioned.

"I believe it is in the steward's room," answered the lawyer. "I will go and get it from him." So saying, he went past them and left the library.

They waited in silence for his return. Violet, listening passively to the rapid play of talk, had been watching Ailsa with the idea that she had kept something back. That feeling, coupled with Harry's impulsive utterance of the girl's name, led her to a realization of the truth. Recalling his hesitation when she and Lady Hilmerceux met him on the stairs, she told herself that she understood. With another glance at their two faces now, she turned away without a word, and left the room.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLACE OF WATCH

I

Mr. Lemartine made his way briskly to the steward's room. He knocked, and a footstep sounded within. The door opened, and the steward appeared. When he saw his visitor he stepped back for him to enter, and the lawyer followed him in.

"I have come for a key," he said, "the key of the Place of Watch. Is it kept here?"

Radford looked at him.

"Yes; it hangs here," he said. "Why do you ask for it?"

"We want to have a look inside," answered Mr. Lemartine.

The steward's face suddenly changed.

"And who talks of going into the Place of Watch?" he cried. "Some of the guests? Mere idle curiosity! They have no business there. No one should know better than you that it's an unlucky thing to do."

"This is not mere curiosity, Mr. Radford," said the lawyer. "One of the young ladies has been frightened down there. Miss Rose thought she heard a noise like some one opening the grille. She came in just now very excited."

"A noise?" said the steward impatiently. "Why, the place has been locked up for many years, so what noise could she hear?"

"I daresay she was mistaken," rejoined the lawyer tolerantly. "But the girl seems somewhat alarmed, so it will be as well to go down and see."

Radford eyed him with the same stern air.

"It bodes ill-luck for the house if you do," retorted he. "Only three people must ever go in—the steward, the Keeper of the Watch, and the heir on his coming of age. That is the law of the house. No stranger must cross the grille."

Mr. Lemartine smiled.

"An ancient superstition!" he said. "A legend of the past, Radford, like the Place of Watch itself. Why, man, I had no idea you were so superstitious."

The other heard this with a slight frown.

"That's easy talk," he said curtly. "I'm responsible for the key of the Place of Watch, as I have been for twenty years past. Who wants it opened now?"

"I suggested it, I believe," replied Mr. Lemartine, "and Lord Hilmerceux agrees."

"Well," said the steward, "It's unusual, and I'll not let the key go out of my sight. I'll come with you."

"Do so, and your conscience will be clear, as you are the one allowed by the rule of the house to go in."

There was no answering smile on Radford's face as he took a heavy key with a curved ward from the safe, blowing down it to remove the dust. Then he looked round for his hat.

They went out of the room and to the library. Sir Hilary and the vicar were by the window, but there was no one else in the room.

"Here is Mr. Radford," said the lawyer to them. "He has the key."

"Excellent!" said Sir Hilary encouragingly. "We can go around to the drive through this window—it will be the quickest way."

The steward nodded to the two antiquarians, and glanced around the room.

"Isn't Lord Hilmerceux coming?" he asked.

"No," remarked the vicar. "He said he would not come."

They stepped out through the window into the open air. It had fallen darker than ever, but a gentle breeze

was beginning to stir on the downs, just enough to cause a faint rustling among the trees.

"A beautiful night for excavation work!" remarked Sir Hilary, glancing about him in the scented air. "It was just such a night as this when we exhumed the remains of those nuns near the Michelgrove barn. Do you remember, Adsell? But come, let us go. I am quite anxious to see inside the Place of Watch."

In the velvet darkness of the night the little group proceeded round the house and down the drive to the point where it turned off from the lake to sweep in a great curve through the far extremity of the park. In the bend of the drive the Place of Watch bulked gray, close to a reedy path by the lake's brink, where a few stars were mirrored in the unruffled sheet like points of gold. The Place of Watch looked very lonely and desolate just then, and Mr. Lemartine found himself wondering what had taken Ailsa there alone. Whatever the cause of her alarm the place seemed deserted enough now.

They walked across the grass until they stood before the tall iron gates. The steward had an electric torch, which he held to the grille while fitting the key. It cast a small moving tunnel of light on the dismantled place within, and gleamed on crumbling masonry behind upright pillars, with a dark closed door between. But desolation and loneliness were all the light revealed. The silent Place of Watch seemed as empty of life as a tomb.

The grille went back with a harsh noise, and they crossed a small paved courtyard to the door, which yielded, unlocked, to the steward's hand. Within was a large dark room, with naked damp walls of stone rising into the higher gloom. The torch threw a gleam of light on a blocked-up inner door, a spiral stone staircase ending in a gap midway, and the face of a great bronze clock in the farthest wall. On it was carved a winged figure of Time, clad in a sleeveless mantle encircled with a cord, seated on a throne, holding in his outstretched left hand a scroll, and in his right, a pen. Above the enthroned

figure, in low relief on the stone, appeared the Hilmerceux arms, with a Tudor rose and fleur-de-lis on each side. Over the clock-face was a niche, where hung an instrument of bronze, with bands of silver-gilt.

"There has been no one here," said the vicar.

His thin voice came back sharply from the silent wall. Mr. Lemartine started slightly, and looked round. The eeriness of the place affected his nerves, and he felt as though he had broken into a tomb. Sir Hilary, more at home in tombs than abodes of living, peered happily through blue glasses, his antiquarian senses alert.

"Very interesting," he said. "Do you observe, Adsell, how the staircase has fallen into decay? It's a great pity. Twelfth century, I should say, though the archway of the door is undoubtedly flat Tudor. The staircase once led to the railed platform above, where the Watch was formerly kept. The platform is now only accessible from the outside. I was looking at it the other day."

"I am more interested in the clock face," the vicar replied. "The design is most unusual—certainly not Dutch. Lend me the torch for a moment, Mr. Radford, please. I want to read the inscription beneath. Thanks! What is it? 'Take thee a great bowl' . . . no, it cannot be bowl. Tut, tut, how stupid of me!—'Roll.' From Isaiah, of course. 'Take thee a great roll, and write in it with a man's pen.' That accounts for the scroll and the pen. The whole thing is Biblical in conception, even to the small receptacle for ink suspended from the cord around Time's waist—the ink-horn of Ezekiel."

"It looks to me more like one of the inkpots of the Pompeian wall-paintings," said Sir Hilary, examining it through his spectacles. "And the pen is not Hebraic. It's reed pen of the fifth century, I should say, by the shape. The Biblical prophets were not alone in the knowledge of ink writing, you know. There is an ink papyrus in existence—Assa VIth dynasty—which probably dates back two thousand years before Christ. We've made very little advance in writing implements since then."

"What about fountain pens?" asked the vicar.

"Fountain pens—those messy things? Pooh, my dear Adsell, fountain pens date back to the fifth century!"

"Lead pencils were used in the second century," said Mr. Adsell mildly, "but this is new to me about fountain pens. I thought they were a modern and American invention. On whom do you base your authority for the statement?"

"Damocharis. I have in mind a phrase in which he speaks of a writing implement which is 'full of blackness.' What else can that mean but a fountain pen?"

"I should like to see the passage before pronouncing an opinion upon it," rejoined the vicar, still examining the clock. "I suppose this curious instrument of bronze, with the silver bands, was used by the Watcher to turn the great hands of the clock to the hour of death when he received the signal from the house, standing, for the purpose, on this chest."

He pointed to the only piece of furniture in the place, an old oak chest with wrought-iron hinges, secured by padlocked clasps, with a thin parchment book hanging above it. Sir Hilary took the book off the nail and looked within. He read:

"Schedule of Contents of the Owlde Greate Cheste, on the 9th day of April, the 26th year of the lady Elizabeth, now Queen, by Richard Greenways, steward of my Lord of Hilmerceux.

"Seven carpetts of Turkey, eaten with mothes . . . 1 broken fire pan, a payre of bellows, a chamber pott, 1 mapp of Europe valued at eightpence, one owlde bed of downe, a bolster of fethers, one owlde blue taffeta sheet, one crymson cushion with some goulde lace . . . item . . . diverse sortes of boocks."

"An interesting record by your predecessor in office, Mr. Radford," said the baronet, smiling at the steward. "Are the things still there?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "There is no key for it."

"It would be interesting to find out," said Sir Hilary.

"That blocked-up door leads to an inner room," remarked the vicar.

"Yes; the 'Chamber under the Stayres,'" said Sir Hilary. "Once the bedchamber of the Keeper of the Watch."

The talk trailed off into silence. The torch gleamed in the darkness on the brooding figure of Time, and the spiral staircase broken midway. The dank air was heavy with the musty odor of disuse and decay. The intruders in the ancient place stood and looked about them. A faint noise like pattering feet in the gloom overhead lifted three startled elderly faces upward. Radford remained unmoved.

"We've disturbed the owls," he said. "They'll start to screech directly. There's plenty of them there, in the ivy."

The lawyer's ears caught the faint mockery in the steward's voice which the others missed.

"There seems no reason why we should continue to disturb the owls," he observed dryly. "Let us go."

"It is very stuffy in here," said Mr. Adsell sniffing, "quite like a vault."

They passed in procession through the open door, Radford coming last with the light, and carefully locking the grille when they were outside. And when he had done this he tried it, shaking the bars with his hands. The sight caused the lawyer to smile.

"Are you afraid someone might break in, Mr. Radford?" he asked.

The steward, an iron man at an iron gate, had no answering smile.

"I am responsible for the place," he said.

Sir Hilary and the vicar had gone ahead. The lawyer and the steward followed more slowly. Mr. Lemartine was glad to leave the Place of Watch behind. Once he glanced back at it, but quickly turned away, haunted by a vision of the empty room, where the enthroned

figure of Time bent over his writing, inscribing the names of humanity until Judgment Day, when the scroll, and the earth, too, would shrivel up. . . .

II

The beauty of the night dispersed these thoughts. The scent of the garden floated across the lawn, and Mr. Lemartine could see the faint outline of tall blooms swaying mysteriously to one another, like flowers dancing prettily to the music of a fairy orchestra. In the distance the house gleamed with lights in the unchanged setting of a thousand years, and beyond it loomed the downs like small mountains cut to a miniature scale. How beautiful it all was, and how peaceful too! He was glad to think that Ailsa's fear had proved a phantom of the imagination, and no illicit shape had made an irruption into the mellow scene. The downs knew other moods, and the old house, also, but this night the scene was set for romance, and young lovers' dreams. So ran the lawyer's thoughts as he made his way up the velvet slope with the steward at his side.

They were near enough to the house to see the open lighted windows and to hear the sound of voices and merriment floating out upon the scented air. There was an animated group in the music-room, and some dancing was going on. In the drawing-room the face of the hostess showed in tranquil silhouette against the curtain's waving lace. She was listening to Dick Aldious, who was standing with one hand on the open sill, talking in his easy way. From this scene the lawyer's eye wandered to the terrace, and saw two figures in black shadow there. Looking up from the lawn, he knew who they were.

The quotidian and eternal serpent had entered the garden of romance. The lawyer reflected that this was the second incident of the kind in which the companion by his side had shared. Not that it mattered. Meetings of this kind would inevitably be common gossip in the

servants' hall before long, and Radford at least was safe—almost as safe as himself. For himself, it did not count. A lawyer's mind, like the grave, was the repository of many shameful things, and held them with the same unconcern. But other minds were not so discreet.

There was something in the glimpse of these two—in the drooping figure of the girl, and the head bent over her—which revived in Mr. Lemartine the memory of a similar encounter of long ago; a scene buried in his mind for forty long years, and emerging from it now, like a ghost. The same blood, the same entanglement. . . .

He felt angry. Could not Lord Hilmerceux see the impropriety of meeting a girl of inferior social station in this stealthy nocturnal way, on the terrace of his own house, with a house-party of guests there? Where was his breeding—the dignity of his class? Unfortunately the men of his house had little thought of breeding or honor when a pretty face was at stake. Others might think of such things, and others might count the cost. They did neither. Reckless and mad where a woman was concerned, what did they care for the cost? Passion and shame brooded like phantoms in that airless dark spot, as they had brooded at Hilmerceux before.

Edging away from the dark corner of the terrace, Mr. Lemartine faced the situation squarely. For every one's sake this indiscretion must not go on. As he diverged still farther from the spot he wondered whether the man who had walked at his side had noticed the couple there. Glancing round, he saw with relief that the end of the terrace was no longer in view. But others might see them there. A chance word, heralded abroad by a malicious tongue, would start gossip. Mr. Lemartine felt some action was forced upon him.

Radford's voice reached him in the darkness. Indeed, the steward had been speaking for some moments past without breaking the detachment of his thoughts.

. . . "The land's not much good for mixed farming; it is really only fit for grazing sheep, like so much of the

downs land. Well, Palmer offers a fair price for it, and I'm in favor of letting him have it."

"Of what are you talking, Radford?"

"Happy Thorn Farm. I've just been telling you that Palmer wants to buy it." In the darkness Mr. Lemartine could hear the surprise in the other's voice.

"Was it this you wanted to speak to me about?"

"That, and some other things."

"I shall be glad if you postpone discussion of them until to-morrow."

"Very well. Perhaps you will make it after dinner. I shall be over at the model farm all day."

"I'll come down to your office then."

The steward turned away. "Then I'll say good night. I shall go to the stables and tell Swann that I want the small car early."

"Good night."

Left alone, Mr. Lemartine walked slowly towards the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

CURRENTS

I

A week passed, and most of the guests were leaving Hilmerceux next day. In her sitting room after lunch the hostess told Dick Aldious that some of the young people were returning for the tennis at the Angmering tournament about the middle of the month: the Fredcroft girls and Margery Lorne, who were going to play. And Violet Fieldhurst was staying on.

"Is she playing?" asked Dick.

She shook her head.

"No; but Sir Hilary is attending some archæological gathering in London, and Violet would be alone at Fieldhurst Court. So she will stay with me until her father returns."

Dick laughed.

"You will have quite a harem of girls. What about men?"

"Young Alwyn is coming for the tennis too." She hesitated, then—"I want you to stay on. Will you, Dick?"

Dick Aldious looked at her from beneath arched brows. His well-formed features and urbane presence suggested an air of detachment from life, though it was difficult to guess what precisely lay hidden beneath the smiling brightness of his eyes. He was distantly connected with his hostess on his mother's side, though he had not seen her for some years, not since she lost her sons in the war. Aldious had been educated for the Bar, but had come into money through the death of an uncle. Since then he had passed his time in Florence and Paris, with occasional visits to his small place in Kent. Lady Hil-

merceux liked and trusted him though she had not seen him for so long. He was now thirty-five.

"Why do you wish me to stay?"

She rested her hand on his chair.

"Dick, I want you to do what you can for Harry."

"I?" His fingers touched lightly the hand resting near. "What can I do for such a fortunate youth?"

"This is all so new to him." Her glance embraced the surroundings of the room, the terrace on which it looked, and the distant park. "I have done what I could, but I am a woman. He needs a man friend."

"I am little qualified for such a post," he said deprecatingly.

She looked at him tranquilly, and rejoined:

"You have intelligence, Dick, and you know the world."

"I am not so sure. And intelligence is small use in the world of to-day, wallowing delightedly in realism and sex. Intelligence is a passionless thing—or should be."

"All the more reason then. You will help him, if you can?"

His bright glance enveloped her. "What exactly do you fear?"

"Nothing—but I should like to feel he could count on you, in case of need. If you can stay here longer you would get to know him better, when the others are gone."

"Very well," he said quietly.

She thanked him with a look. Then her gaze strayed through the open window to the distant white figures at the nets.

"Violet plays really well," she said. "Don't you think she is a lovely girl?"

He nodded, and his own glance sought the courts.

"Miss Rose is charming," he casually observed.

"Ailsa?" Her voice was absent, her eyes fixed on two of the players. "Yes; she is a dear girl."

"Who is she—precisely?"

"The granddaughter of William Fenton, who went away with Harry Hilmerceux forty years ago. The

girl's grandmother died a few months back, so I brought Ailsa here. It is what Harry himself would have wished, if he had lived. He liked William Fenton."

He was subtle enough to gather from her tone that this forgotten tragedy had meant something to her.

"Harry seems fond enough of her," he observed after a pause, with a barely perceptible glance.

"Yes," she rejoined, in the same absent voice. "They have seen much of each other. We have been quite alone here together, until now."

He looked at her with a more thoughtful gaze.

"What are you going to do with the girl?" he asked.

"Oh, she is very happy here with me." She settled back more comfortably in her chair, to watch the tennis better.

Her companion did not reply, but sat looking out across the sunlit terrace. Lady Hilmerceux spoke again.

"Dick, I want Harry to marry Violet Fieldhurst."

He looked at her curiously.

"Is he in love with her?" he asked.

"I hope so, and I am sure she is fond of him. That is why I have asked her to stay on—so as to give them a chance to understand each other better."

He smiled a man's smile at this, and rose.

"You will excuse me now? If I am to stay on I must send off some telegrams and letters at once."

II

Lady Hilmerceux sat still in contemplative solitude, looking out on the tennis courts, peace in her heart. But she was not left to her meditation for long. A footstep caused her to look round, and she saw Mr. Lemartine standing in the open doorway.

"May I come in?" he said.

"Yes; do," she said.

"I wanted to see you," he said, as he took the chair by her side. "They told me I would find you here."

"Yes?" she said inquiringly. "What is it, Lemartine? Is it about that matter—the marriage settlements—of which I spoke to you the other day?"

"No," he said slowly, "not that."

She turned to him.

"What then?" she asked.

He still hesitated in the effort to find fitting words to state the purpose of his interview. He was the old and trusted adviser of the family, but he knew well that he was venturing on delicate ground. But a penetrating sense of duty and their joint memory of the past made him go on. At that moment Ailsa and Cecily Fredcroft passed quickly along the terrace and nodded smilingly in. Lady Hilmerceux smiled upon them both in return.

"There is Ailsa," she said, "Do you know, I have grown quite fond of her. I have never regretted bringing her here."

It was as good an opening as he could have made, and he took it.

"Your words lead up to what I wish to speak to you about. Has it ever come to your mind that there may be some danger there?"

Her eyes sought his face in quick surprise, but it was evident that she had not gathered the implication of his words.

"A danger, Lemartine—what kind of a danger? What is that you mean?"

Her face was rigid with anger, but he went on.

"Well," he said, "Lord Hilmerceux and Miss Rose are much together."

She took alarm now in a flash.

"And if they are—what then?"

"Then"—he sought cautiously for words—"experience must be your guide."

She paled, but her eyes were bright with anger.

"Lemartine, you forget yourself! What am I to understand from your words? Are you suggesting——"

"I mean nothing beyond putting you on your guard,"

he quickly interposed. "That, and my memory of the past, have impelled me to this thankless task. I ask you to believe that."

"Well?" she said.

"Was it not Meredith who said something about the stroke of Then and Now ringing in one's ears like a bell?"

She looked at him impatiently.

"You have something more in your mind than a dead quotation, Lemartine, or you would not have come to me with your suspicions. What is it?"

"True; I have," he rejoined. "It is this. Some days back I overheard words of gossip between some of your guests—enough to cause me to keep my own eyes open. And now it seems necessary to tell you. An unpleasant task, truly, but I believe there is danger—certainly where Miss Rose is concerned."

Her face, charged with anxious emotion, showed that she had taken the fullest meaning from his words.

"I had no thought of this," she said bitterly. "I find it difficult to believe even now. Ailsa owes me duty—an obligation, to say the least."

"I do not think you will find the girl lacking in a sense of duty," he began.

But she was not listening to him. She sat still in her chair for some time without speaking. After a while she said quietly:

"I will send Ailsa away at once."

"That would be very unfair," Mr. Lemartine answered gravely. "Let me beg of you to act more discreetly than this, or I shall be very sorry I spoke. You know you brought Miss Rose here, and treated her like a daughter."

"I have made provision for her—after my death."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, but remained silent.

Lady Hilmerceux moved impatiently in her chair. "I do not see how she can remain, if this is true," she said. "There can be no talk of love or flirtation between them. That would mean folly and misery—worse perhaps."

Their eyes met in silence, as if in both their minds

some secret thing stirred. The lawyer wondered, as he had often wondered before, how much she really knew of that distant episode of the past which was in their thoughts. The reflection prompted him to say:

"That might not be a solution, you know."

She sat staring in front of her, but he knew she had understood.

"Well," she said at last, with a weary sigh, "I shall do nothing in haste, but I will look into it for myself. Perhaps you are making too much of this, though you were wise to let me know. Meantime—" She broke off and continued in a different voice: "I have asked Miss Fieldhurst to stay on at Hilmerceux after the other guests have gone."

At this the lawyer rose from his chair with the knowledge that the interview was at an end, and an old adage about leading unwilling horses to water running in his head. Lady Hilmerceux's mention of her invitation to Miss Fieldhurst had called it to his mind—the horse, in this case, being the heir. With a bow to Lady Hilmerceux he left the room.

Once more alone, Lady Hilmerceux's reflections took a more sombre turn. She thought over what the lawyer had told her, wondering if fate was moving towards her to re-enact a drama of forty years before, with descendants of the first actors on the same stage. With a sinking heart she tried to decide what she ought to do.

III

Later the same day, after dinner, Mr. Lemartine sat downstairs in the steward's room. Radford was talking about leases and taxation, root crops and grazing rights—details of his management on the estate. Mr. Lemartine listened in silence. None knew better than he how Radford had struggled for the redemption of the estate. But even now, after twenty years, it still remained a puzzle to him why the steward had given half a life-time to

that uphill fight. Was it love of power, or the sheer instinctive doggedness of the man? He had come there as under-steward twenty years before, and when Jacobs, the steward, died within two years, he was by that time so indispensable as to succeed without question to the vacant office. Since then he had worked like one with a single purpose to improve the condition of the estate, striving, year in and year out, to lighten the hampering weight of an improvident past. Unflinching he had devoted himself to that purpose with a fidelity and strength which Mr. Lemartine admired without understanding in the least.

Such whole-hearted devotion was rare in a world which puts a premium on self-interest. So, at least, the lawyer thought. Yet what other motive beside the welfare of Hilmerceux could there be? The steward was a man difficult to know, living behind a mask of reserve which the lawyer had never seen lifted, and had never been able to pierce. Radford never talked about himself. Apparently he was quite alone in the world. Certainly Mr. Lemartine had never heard him speak of kith or kin. His life was Hilmerceux. He worked for the disembarrassment of the estate with an assiduity which could not have been surpassed if he had regarded it as his own inheritance, coming to him in the course of time.

Thinking of these things now the lawyer fell to wondering again what the steward thought in his secret heart about the arrival of the heir. The old order still prevailed. There was astonishingly little outward difference at Hilmerceux yet, and Radford's devotion to the estate was seemingly unimpaired. But it was impossible to gather any real idea of what went on in this man's mind. One might as well expect the stone mask above the grille of the Place of Watch to laugh aloud. Mr. Lemartine looked across at the steward now. His serious face was quite devoid of expression as he bent over a grazing lease, which he was reading aloud.

Mr. Lemartine scanned the heavy downcast features

beneath the swinging light. A wonderful man! Such was his thought. What other man could have done for Hilmerceux what he had done? Who would have dreamed when he came there twenty years ago that he would have accomplished so much? He was the embodiment of rugged unyielding strength, like granite or iron. It was a quality Lady Hilmerceux had discerned in him long ago. She had trusted utterly to Radford's management of affairs. And Radford had not failed her. He had done much for Hilmerceux in his silent purposeful way, lessening the load of improvidence bit by bit, strengthening the future of this heritage without an heir.

Outside, and in the country around, he had gradually come to be looked upon almost as the master here. And, indeed, in all affairs of management and detail he was the unquestioned head.

Behind a veil of seclusion Lady Hilmerceux had lived her life of memories almost alone. Although she left the management of affairs to Radford, it was her fortune which enabled him to accomplish so much. Radford had been brought from the steward's house outside to live in the house, so as to be always near. That was a suitable arrangement for the end in view, but one which had the effect of putting servitor and mistress almost on equal terms as time went by. It made the steward more of a colleague than employee, and heightened his masterful authority outside.

The position was an unusual one. Lady Hilmerceux and her steward had spent long years restoring an inheritance without an heir. From the point of view of Lady Hilmerceux the thing was understandable enough. Alone with her broken hopes, she held fast to the tradition of caste, and as the human heart must cherish something she still clung to her idea of the redemption of Hilmerceux. Indeed, there was some horizon to her purpose, for in her inmost soul she never quite forsook the belief that in some miraculous way the name of Hilmerceux would not be allowed to die out. But Radford had no such incen-

tives to spur him on. Then why had he given up half a lifetime to salving a heritage for an incorporeal heir? Was it love of power, and a genuine desire for the respect of the surrounding countryside as the trusted manager of the big house? It might be so.

But now the heir had come, and the future was in his hands. The lawyer wondered what he would do. Although outwardly the position was unchanged, the elements of change were there. So far the heir showed little interest in his heritage, partly redeemed at his coming by the toil and sacrifice of twenty bitter years. He walked like a stranger in his own domain, and in sober truth he was a stranger there, for he had been reared outside the traditions and influence of his house. For that reason he might be more difficult to guide than Lady Hilmerceux seemed to expect. Who was to read the portents? Because of her own action in the past there might be difficulties ahead.

While these thoughts ran through Mr. Lemartine's head the steward had been telling him of estate affairs. The last twelve months had turned out better than he expected at one time. The rent roll and farms management were all that they should be, though one of the tenants had made a disastrous experiment in downland wheat.

"I warned him, but he wouldn't listen to me. These small Sussex farmers are stupid as their sheep. I said it was no good trying to grow paying wheat on the downs. I told the Government experts the same thing during the war. They wouldn't heed me—neither would Renfree. He put down wheat, and now he's behind with his rent."

Mr. Lemartine nodded without venturing an opinion on the point.

"And now, about Happy Thorn Farm," the steward went on. "As I was telling you yesterday, I think it best to sell."

"That's a matter Lord Hilmerceux must decide," returned the lawyer. "You might show him the farm, and explain why you think it should be sold."

The steward looked at the clock.

"Doubtless that must be done," he said, "but I wanted to discuss it with you first. I asked Lord Hilmerceux to spare me a few minutes to-night, for this and some other things."

He spoke slowly, and the lawyer wondered if he felt regret at a supremacy passing away. As ever, his face gave no sign. Just then the door opened, and Harry came into the room.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Radford. What is it you want me for?"

Mr. Lemartine rose. With the memory of an earlier conversation in his mind, he had no wish to remain. With a brief "Good night!" he went out of the room.

IV

When they were alone, Radford went into matters of business at length. Harry listened with an air of abstraction, as if he found the effort to master these details of estate management an increasing strain. After the steward had finished talking he raised eyes of interrogation, waiting for a reply. The young man shrugged his shoulders, but he was a little embarrassed.

"You must just go ahead your own way, Radford," he said. "In these matters of detail I must be guided entirely by you. I know nothing of such things."

"About Happy Thorn Farm, then?" said the steward in unmoved voice.

"That's the place you suggest to sell?"

The steward nodded.

"Have you asked Lady Hilmerceux?"

"Mr. Lemartine did. She refers the decision to you."

"Well, sell it then," said Harry impatiently, "as you think it ought to be sold."

Radford bowed.

"I will execute your orders," he said. "And now, may

I ask you to decide about the trees in the park? I think they ought to be thinned."

Harry looked at him in surprise.

"Why, thin them if you like, without bothering me," he said. "Surely it is a trifling business to cut down a few trees?"

There was a brief pause.

"Lord Hilmerceux, it will be best for you to decide," said the steward at length. "The park is historic. Some of the oaks are hundreds of years old. If you will go with me to the park in the morning I can show you the marked trees."

"Very well, then. Will ten o'clock suit you? I will be down by the lake."

The steward bowed, and sat silent in his chair, fingering his old-fashioned watch-chain, apparently with no more to say.

"Is that all you want, Radford?" asked the heir.

"That is all, Lord Hilmerceux."

"Good night, then."

Harry looked in his face with a smiling nod. The steward bowed gravely by way of reply. Leaving the room, the young man turned to go upstairs, but the billiard-room was open and lighted, and an impulse led his footsteps there instead. It was there he had sat as a stranger on the night of his arrival, and at that moment he felt almost as much a stranger at Hilmerceux as then. And he knew, moreover, that he had not acquitted himself with credit in the steward's eyes.

He sat down to think it all over. In what was he lacking? Wherein was he at fault? He understood nothing about the selling of farms and the thinning of park trees. But the matter went deeper—far deeper—than that. What was it to him, this ancient inheritance, steeped in tradition and memories, where the past counted for more than to-day? Alas, not very much, as he was beginning to realize, though Hilmerceux was his heritage and home, and the home of his ancestors too. In sober reality, it was

nothing to him. But, then, he asked himself, how could it be? Could one bring to such heritage an instinctive, love, after long years of the sea? He looked down at his hands thoughtfully. . . . On that unstable element he had lived since a boy. The sea was his home, more than here. His look grew remote, in the secret perplexity of his thought.

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He roused himself from his reverie at length with the consciousness that it was growing late. Upstairs, the house was very quiet. He rose to his feet with a sigh, and left the billiard-room.

The hall was lighted, but empty. He was about to set foot on the staircase when the library door opened, and Ailsa appeared. He walked down the corridor towards her, recalling their first meeting there. She saw him approaching, and waited at the open door.

"So you still go down late at night for books?" he said, glancing at the volume beneath her arm.

She smiled a little in response.

"Yes," she said softly.

"Our guests will soon be leaving us," he went on.

"Aren't you glad?"

She raised eyes of innocent inquiry.

"Why?"

"We can have more walks on the downs. I cannot see much of you with all these people here. Will you come for a walk to-morrow?"

She shook her head.

"I have to go across to my grandmother's cottage," she said.

"Then let me come too."

"You cannot," she said seriously. "I have—oh! such lots of things to do before the new shepherd moves in. I am riding over in the morning and shall be there all day."

"Then I'll come over in the afternoon and bring you back. What time shall I be there?"

"I shall be finished about five o'clock, but—do you think you ought to come?"

"Why not?" he asked with a smile.

Her breast stirred a little. She looked at him from drooped lids before she replied.

"Lady Hilmerceux might not like it."

"Why should she mind?" he said obtusely. "She did not object before."

She was silent, not having words to reply. In silence they turned towards the stairs, and here once more they paused. Her beauty turned his mind to a different angle, banishing his previous gloom. Looking at her downcast face with eager and animated eyes, the impulse was strong within him to take her in his arms and kiss her hair and lips.

"I must go," she murmured.

She turned quickly away, looking nervously about her as she went. But the dim corridor was empty, save for a visored figure in armor, standing by the staircase curtains in static pose. When she reached the landing she turned round and looked over the baluster at him standing below.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WOOD

I

Standing amid the purple honesty in the garden Ailsa watched the rooks sailing high above her head. They flew in unison, wheeling and crossing, flying mysteriously without a sound. The long rays of the sun burnished their dark plumage with metallic sheen, and lit up the girl's figure with gold. In the light a sombre shadow crept across the garden, and she looked quickly around. Harry was tying up his horse at the fence.

He came towards her gaily.

"You are like a picture of a girl among birds," he said.

"What is the matter with the rooks?"

"They don't know whether to leave their old rookery or not," she said with a smile. "They've been quarreling about it for a long while, but they are quiet now. I think they've decided to go."

He looked up at the sailing rooks, and laughed.

"Do birds talk together?" he lightly asked.

"Oh, rooks are not like other birds," she said, shaking a serious head. "They do things together. They squabble a lot before making up their minds, but once they decide there is nothing more to be said. I used to like listening to them at dawn, cawing sleepily to themselves, trying to wake up. And sometimes they would awaken me in the middle of the night with a great noise, and I'd hear their wings flapping as they flew up into the dark sky."

"Why do they do it?" he asked.

"I suppose something disturbs them," she replied.

"And yet—I don't know. Rooks are very strange birds.

They flew out of the wood during the night my grandmother died."

Harry was scanning the trees.

"It's a very dense wood," he said, "and what a number of nests! The upper branches are bending with them."

"The rookery is a very old one," she said. "Rooks hardly ever desert their home. No matter how many of the young ones are shot, the old birds use the same nests again in the spring. That's why it seems so strange to see these poor things flying like wanderers above their old home, not quite knowing what to do. Look! They are going away."

The rooks, cawing loudly now, were setting out in a dark cloud through the still evening air. They went off swiftly, like birds resolved. Even to the young man's unaccustomed eye there was something definite and final in that swift black exodus across the empty downs. A few remained behind, floating high overhead like burnt leaves wind-driven from a hidden fire, cawing mournfully above the forsaken wood as though bidding it farewell. Then they streamed off to join their fellows, now vanishing afar.

Ailsa watched the rooks until they were out of sight. Then she looked at Harry.

"The cottage will be lonely without them," she said with a sigh. She hesitated, with a glance towards the open door. "Would you like to see inside it?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Yes, I should," he said.

He followed her through the doorway. It was almost dark within, but a faint light falling through the drawn blind gave a glimpse of the sitting-room, staircase, and a small kitchen, with a forgotten kettle on the hob. The young man looked about him at these things, trying to picture an earlier and unknown Ailsa here: a cottage girl setting a tea-table and talking brightly to a frail old figure in an arm-chair by the fire. It must have been a lonely life for her in this isolated cottage on the downs, backed by that dark wood of thick and matted trees. Just now the

dying sunshine was quivering in the green depths, like light in the depth of the sea. He glanced at Ailsa. She was standing with her hands clasped lightly before her, like a girl lost in thought.

"Look at the sunlight in the wood," he said.

Her eyes went towards it.

"Like a fire in a deep green cave of the sea," he added.

The idea pleased her. She raised her face to him, as they stood side by side in the open doorway.

"On summer mornings I used to watch the gold creeping through the green," she told him. "After July it came a little later every day. But you ought to see the wood on nights when there's a bright moon. That's when it's prettier still—oh, ever so much more! Only, the colors are black and silver then, not gold and green. But the wood is not always pretty, like this. It's rather a dismal place in winter, when the wind is moaning through the trees. Still, they kept the wind at a distance, and never let it come near the house."

They stood awhile silent. The long dark shadows cast by the trees were falling athwart the cottage already, but beyond the radius of the wood the open country still sparkled in light. Harry took a step into the sunshine.

"Let us take a walk on the downs," he suggested. "The horses will be all right here, tied up to the fence."

She assented with a ready smile. Locking the door of the cottage, she placed the key beneath a stone by the porch.

"Which way shall we go?" she asked him.

"Anywhere," was his response. "Suppose you take me one of the walks you used to go when you lived here."

She hesitated, looking around her, then acquiesced with a nod.

"Very well," she said, "let us go this way."

He turned towards her as they walked along.

"Have you never been anywhere except on these downs, Ailsa?"

She shook her head.

"Only to Worthing, where I went to school."

"Oh, Worthing!" he exclaimed with a smile. "You know, this strikes me as a very sleepy part of England—a place where no one ever wants to do anything."

"What should they want to do?" she inquired, looking up at him.

"Do? Why, get out and see the world!"

"They seem happy enough here."

"Yes—in a bovine kind of way. But humanity is supposed to have more enterprise than cattle. People should not remain rooted in one spot all their lives—like trees."

"A tree is a happy and peaceful thing, and seems quite content," said she, with a lurking smile.

He laughed a little at that.

"Why, what an idea! Is contentment a virtue, then?"

She looked at him somewhat perplexed, but did not reply.

They entered a narrow green track which led between two short hills. They found themselves on a sort of a plateau, with the downs stretching all around; solitary, but not lonely; old, yet eternally young. Black Patch and Chanctonbury towered aloft, Cissbury, head sunk on earth ramparts, seemed to be reflecting on its past. In the distance, between a cleft of two hills, stretched a gray thread of sea.

Harry looked round him at this scene. Then his eyes sought the distant Channel.

"In some ways your downs remind me of the sea," he said.

"They change from day to day," she said.

"True, but I didn't mean like that," he answered.

"It's because they are open and green, and the wind blows free across them—different from a house. A house is like a cage to me."

"Not all houses, . . . not Hilmerceux?" she asked timidly.

"Yes—Hilmerceux as well."

She eyed him gravely.

"You shouldn't feel like that about it."

"Why not?"

"Because it is your home, and it has been the home of your family for generations."

"How can Hilmerceux be anything to me? I never saw it until three months ago."

"But now—it is yours," she said.

"Even that does not make it appeal to me as it should."

He spoke restlessly, his eye still on the distant sea. She looked at him with a sort of wonder.

"You shouldn't say that," she urged seriously.

He threw her a quick glance.

"Why not, if I think so?"

She hesitated, then said, rather low:

"It is your duty to like it."

He stared at that.

"Duty! I have heard quite a lot of that word since coming here. But one's duty is to one's self."

She shook her head.

"You know it is not."

"What is it, then?" he asked challengingly.

She hesitated for a definition, and he went on, in the same reckless manner:

"Ailsa, it's almost a pity you were not the heiress, instead of Hilmerceux coming to me. You . . . you would value it more."

He turned towards her, but she shrank a little away, and the color flamed in her face.

"You should not say that," she said—this time very low.

After that she did not speak for a while, but walked rather faster. In silence they came to the summit of a ridge, looking down on a dim green valley encompassed by heather-clad hills. A path wandered down the hill-side past a clear patch in the green, with pink flowers growing at the brink.

"That is a dew-pond," said Ailsa.

They went forward to where the little pond shone like a pearl in its setting of green and pink. Around it the heather grew thick. It was very still there. A hare,

lingering in the heather, whisked off like a flash at the sight of them. Ailsa stood by the pond, looking down at a leaf floating on the water. Harry went closer, until he could see her face and slim figure reflected in the shallow waters of the pool.

"Ailsa!" he said.

She looked at him, and her own glance went quickly across the downs.

"We must be going back now," she said, in a hurried voice. "Look! the sun has nearly set."

The light was dying in a clear sky, and long shadows were stealing across the downs. Overhead, one great white pinnacle of a cloud seemed toppling into unfathomable depths of blue.

Slowly he turned towards her, but she was still looking away.

"Yes"—he spoke in different voice—"I suppose we must go."

In the lingering brightness of the dying day they retraced their steps towards the cottage. Making their homeward journey by a different and shorter way, they found themselves on the far side of the little wood. Ailsa broke a long silence.

"I came a little too far around," she said with a smile. "Now we must take the path through the wood."

She showed him the path a little distance away, where the pine trees grew. Within the wood the deeper dusk enfolded them like a soft and velvet mantle, and they could hardly see to walk. The scent of pines was in the air, and the pine needles made a carpet beneath their feet. From a shadowy bough a thrush piped a tremulous evensong, but flew away when they stood still to listen. The path grew narrower and darker, the tree trunks were bent together in strange shapes. It was as though night had fallen there. Ailsa, looking around her, drew closer to her companion's side.

The path opened out again. From the widening avenue

they could see the cottage now, quite close at hand, and the two horses fastened to the fence not far away.

An owl, sailing in heavy, low flight through the dim spaces of the wood, swept across the narrow path, buffeting Ailsa in the face with its wings. She gave a low, startled cry as the bird flew off, and turned to Harry with fluttering hands. The next moment she was in his arms, her head against his breast. He bent over and kissed her hair again and again. They stood thus for a moment until she lifted her drooping head, leaning back as if to look up at him. He saw her white face in the gloom, and her eyes, like stars, uplifted to his. Then their lips met in a long, passionate kiss.

The wind whispered softly in the trees, heavy with the scent of the pines.

CHAPTER XX

VISTAS

I

“What was that?”

Her lips moved in the merest whisper.

“Some one crossing the downs perhaps.”

“Footsteps make no sound on the downs. The noise came from close by.”

She spoke unsteadily, slipping away from him like an elf in the darkness of the glade. He could see her indistinct form, a little distance away. One of the horses gave a sharp neigh, and there was a sound like the crackling of a twig.

He went forth quickly, scanning first the empty cottage on the edge of the wood, and then looking across the downs, now gray and mysterious in the darkening twilight. The two horses waited patiently until it pleased their owners to return. Passive they stood, the lengthening shadows from the wood falling on them. The sight of them reminded him that anyone passing would have seen them, and perhaps recognized them. He shrugged his shoulders. After all, did it matter so much?

Thoughtfully he returned to the wood. Ailsa was in the spot where he had left her, a look on her face which he failed to comprehend. He would have taken her in his arms again, but something held him aloof and mute.

“We had better go home now,” she said in a constrained voice.

“Very well,” he simply replied.

They soon left the wood and reached the horses. He helped her to mount. At a slow pace they made their way, wary of rabbit-holes in the gathering dusk. The track

rose from the cottage, which was soon hidden from view, and on the right the downs curved placidly upward to the summit of Chanetonbury Ring. In one of the deep hollows between lay Mouldering House. Harry caught a momentary glimpse of it in its secret glen as they rode along, and saw its windows glimmer in the dying light. Then the billowy greenness surged round it again: its four hills enfolded it and hid it from view. The brief vista of it in the gloaming was vaguely disturbing to the young man, and he wondered if Ailsa had actually seen a light in it on the night of her grandmother's death. Perhaps it had been an illusion created by the storm. He pictured the convulsed elements sweeping over the dark solitude of the downs, electricity from the heavens forking into the deep glen where the old gray place stood, evoking a refracted gleam from the strange flat window in the roof, terrifying as a flash in the glazed eye of a corpse. Ailsa, looking from her cottage window in the rain-swept darkness of the storm, might have imagined the reflected ray to be an actual light.

He turned in his saddle to tell her his thoughts, but did not. She was sitting on her horse like a figure carved in stone, gazing into the gathering darkness. It was as though she was alone on the downs, and he far away. They rode on in silence.

They came to a spot where a white track ran across the downs to some overarching trees. Ailsa pointed to it with her whip, speaking for the first time since leaving the wood.

"The track leads down to the village," she said. "I think we had better go home that way, and along the road. It is too dark for the horses on the downs."

"All right," he said, "if you know the way."

They turned off the downs and followed the white track until it brought them to the twisting village street. Beyond this the road ran straight ahead and past the gates of Hilmerceux. Again they went along quietly, no sound but their horses' hoofs breaking the shadowy silence of the downs which stretched on both sides of the straight white

road. Thus they rode on until the great gates of Hilmerceux showed in the darkness not far away; looming before them with an air of mocking finality to the girl's eyes.

The horses had chosen their homeward pace. Mounting the long incline which led to the park gates, they now fell into a slow walk. In the shadow of the park trees Harry moved slightly in the saddle, bending over to the girl at his side.

"Ailsa!" he said.

She glanced towards him, expectant, passive. He put out his hand and clasped hers. In the twilight their glances met.

"Do you love me?"

"You know I do," was her whispered reply.

And, indeed, her eyes, shining with unshed tears, told him that—and more.

II

Waiting alone for the heir in the drawing-room after dinner that same evening, Lady Hilmerceux thought carefully of what she intended to say. She felt it would be wiser to avoid all reference to what Lemartine had told her. After all, the boy was young, and it was just possible that the lawyer was making too much of some slight flirtation. She decided to talk to him simply and straightforwardly about the future and the duties of his high position, trusting to his sense of propriety and honor to do the rest. So far he had been docile where her wishes were concerned, and she did not much fear that he would go against them now. In spite of the lawyer's warning about the heritage of blood, she believed the boy had, by his upbringing, missed the taint, just as he was lacking in the unconscious pride of race. In her heart she was thankful to think this was so, because it made the task before her easier to discharge. Her one mistake in diagnosing the situation was in supposing that, notwithstand-

ing, the instinct of caste was sufficiently strong in him to allow her to dominate his future for him.

The door opened, and Harry came into the room.

"You wished to speak to me?" he said.

She smiled up at him.

"Yes, Harry," she said. "Sit down by me."

He took a low chair near her, and waited. After a moment she went on:

"Harry, I have been thinking about your future."

"I thought that was already arranged," he rejoined with a smile.

"Yes—but not altogether. My thoughts were not only of you. I have been looking farther ahead still."

The quick intuition which at least was his gift of race took her meaning in a flash. He did not speak. She looked at him quickly, trying to gain some inkling of his thoughts, but his expression gave her no key. With a brief pause she continued:

"Harry, it is your duty to marry early."

At this he laughed pleasantly.

"Are you thinking of making a match for me?" he asked.

"It is merely a suggestion," she rejoined seriously.

"The Hilmerceux men have always married young."

"Young!" he repeated musingly. "One might marry too young."

She raised her head quickly.

"Not in your case. Indeed, it is your duty. So much depends upon it."

Duty! It seemed to him he was hearing just a little too much of that wry word. It had been dinned into his ears since his arrival at Hilmerceux, like an unceasing chime. Seemingly every act of his life was claimed as a duty by a house which had banished his father abroad to die in broken-hearted exile, and left him when a boy to seek his living at sea. Did such treatment merit duty in return?

She went on speaking:

"You see, Harry, there is no one else but you. The future of Hilmerceux is in your hands. Yours is a great responsibility—a solemn trust. Think how much it means! It is for you to marry early and choose well, for the sake of the house. That is a duty and an honor laid upon you."

She spoke with dignity, as if her words could not be gainsaid. Outwardly calm, he listened in silence, thinking upon her words from his point of view. Because spend-thrifts had squandered, he was to repair. Because of dead rakes' lusts and gambling, an allotted wife and parsimony were marked out for him. He had heard it too often before to give serious consideration to it now. His own youth and the instincts within him called to him more loudly than the tottering traditions of a dying past. A vision of the little dark wood floated before his eyes, and his senses thrilled with the remembrance of Ailsa's lips. . . .

Lady Hilmerceux was speaking again.

"Violet Fieldhurst would be a very suitable wife in every way."

He looked at her with astonished eyes.

"Is that why you asked her to stay on here?" he asked.

"I do not think you could do better," she said pursuing her own line of thought, "not in the county, at least."

"But I do not love her," he urged.

"You will have a better opportunity now to see if you can love her," she rejoined. "There is no reason why you should not. She is a pretty and charming girl, of good blood, though not as good as our own. And she will have money, Harry—which you need. Her father is wealthy, and he would welcome the match."

A sense of discomfort came to him.

"Have you mentioned this to him?" he asked.

"No," she said quietly. "It will be better for you to understand your own feelings first. But you must realize, Harry, that you've rather a limited choice if you marry in the county—and I think it is advisable that you should."

She smiled at him in a final and possessive way, and he understood that this advice represented her ultimate word. Any idea of frankness which may have lingered, half-formed, in his mind, took wings and vanished as he looked at her. The inherent prudence of armoristic ancestors warned him against the folly of confidences in women, if he desired to live in peace. Speaking with an easy smile, he merely said:

"Oh, there is plenty of time, yet."

Her eyes were still on him.

"You'll think of what I've told you, Harry?"

"Yes, certainly."

At the sound of his voice she looked up again quickly, with the momentary sensation that the years had slipped back. It sounded like the echo of his grandfather's voice, last heard forty years before. Even so would he have spoken, with the same suave voice and smile hiding his meaning like a glittering visor. There were depths in the boy, she told herself; the inherent duplicity of the Hilmerceux men, who always played falsely where women were concerned. The discovery roused an odd sense of pride within her, but it stirred her to anger at the same time: anger that he should seek to deceive her as well. For a moment she was on the verge of accusing him of secret designs, where Ailsa was concerned, but checked herself with the feeling that it would be folly to make him aware that he was suspected there. If that was his purpose, it would be better checked in another way. An appeal might have better effect just now. She turned to him with troubled eyes.

"Harry, my dear," she said, "I look to you to uphold the tradition of this house. You have inherited a great name, and it rests with you to continue it. I love Hilmerceux, and I've labored all my life for its redemption. Now the sacred trust descends to you."

Her words had an effect upon him. It was in a different and hesitating voice that he replied:

"I will never forget what you have done, and that I

have done nothing at all. I wish it was different somehow, and that I could see things here more through your eyes. But I was not brought up in the tradition, you know. I ask you always to remember that."

"The tradition?" she spoke questioningly.

"I mean the traditions of the house," he answered. "Until a few weeks ago Hilmerceux was but a word—a name—to me."

"But you have the blood," she said proudly. "It is the same thing."

"I am not so sure—" Again he had a momentary impulse to be frank with her, but some deeper instinct warned him that their points of view were far apart as the poles. The impulse spent itself, and the moment passed away. The next moment she said to him in rather a weary voice:

"We will not talk of this any more to-night, Harry. But you will think over what I have said."

He promised again that he would and left the room after bidding her good night. She sat in her chair when he had gone, sunk deep in thought. He was not going to be so easy to manage after all, although to some extent he was under her influence still. A faint sigh broke from her. Too vividly he brought back the past, and the man who had tried her forgiveness forty years ago. She pondered over his grandfather's indefinable charm, which in those far-off days had always allured her and sapped her woman's strength in some way she had never been able to understand. And the charm of the dead man shone forth again in the boy. Once more she sighed.

III

Silence had fallen on Hilmerceux. In his room late that night Harry sat thinking over the emotions and events of the day, and trying to forecast the future. The words of Lady Hilmerceux did not weigh upon him. Recalling them retrospectively now, he was surprised at the faint impression they had made. For all their effect, they

might have remained unsaid. His inward indifference was not disrespect, nor lack of sympathy with her point of view. Rather had he heard her like one unconcerned with the issue at stake. It had all seemed remote and unreal, like something encountered by chance, and quite unconnected with his actual life.

In similar fashion he had passed each day since coming there, haunted by a sense of unreality in it all. The festivities and congratulations of the last few weeks he had gone through like a man playing a part, but to his inner soul they had been shadowy as a dream. The atmosphere of a mirage brooded over it yet, a transformation too wonderful to be believed. He was the head of a great house, courted and honored, but he could not grasp the fact. What was he, after all, but Harry Vivian, thrown into this strange position by the hazard of chance?

He had told Lady Hilmerceux he had not been brought up in the tradition, but she had not realized how much that meant. It meant that, although Hilmerceux had descended to him, the spirit of its ancient race was not his. At heart he felt like a stranger there: an onlooker—nothing more. The ordered way of his new life was already becoming irksome to him. The devil of restlessness visited him in this old house of the past, set in a green solitude which seemed to encompass him like a tide, cutting him off from the past. He felt at times a kind of loathing for the downs: for sheep and cattle, and phlegmatic farming men. Yet such things, with a little shooting, made up much of a Sussex landowner's life. Unendurable . . . a mere backwash of existence, fit only for those who had never known anything else! At such moments of thinking he would be seized with an almost intolerable longing for the sea. From the downs he could see it, sparkling and restless, calling him subtly to the life of the past.

But Hilmerceux held something more now. The lure of romance flamed within him as he thought of the afternoon—and Ailsa. There was no sense of unreality here. . . .

Instinctively he realized, as he thought of her now, that she was more in harmony with her setting than he. The memories and traditions of Hilmerceux were as dear to her as if they had been her own; or so it seemed. It was a pity they were not. She would have gained more grace in the part, and she would not have raised expectations never to be fulfilled, as he had done. She had the beauty and simplicity of the downs where she had lived all her life—like a piece of meadowsweet—yet in some mysterious manner she was in accord with the spirit of Hilmerceux as he knew he should never be. And he saw in her also subtle indications of a quality he did not possess. Not much, but at odd moments it was there: a look, a way; some trifling unconsidered gesture like the turn of her small head or a movement of her slender hands, which suggested something finer and rarer than the environment of a shepherd's cottage on the downs, something more in the nature of porcelain than delf. The downs had bestowed their own heritage of lovely simplicity upon her, but this added possession was a more artificial thing, hinting, in certain aspects, of the fragile but artificial inheritance of breeding and race. Where had she, who had had so little, gained such things?

His thoughts slipped back to the wood that afternoon. Imagination recalled every tense moment of that time. Again he seemed to feel the pressure of her burning lips, and to discern her face uplifted passionately to his, beneath the dim and fragrant canopy of the pines. He could see her eyes, like stars in the darkness of the wood, the slim outline of her white throat, her long, fair hair. She had been his, passive in his arms, ready to give him all. Then came the sound outside. . . .

Again he saw her look of love, then shook his head impatiently. This was to look back. But now. . . . At that moment she was lying asleep in her room not far away, her beautiful fair hair spread out on the pillow. . . . She was alone in the east wing. . . .

Temptation assailed him. His blood quickened. Desire awoke within him. In the swift uprush of his feeling he was engulfed and almost carried away. Reality vanished. Recklessness and passion held him as in a vice.

Uncertainly he rose from his seat and walked to the window. Drawing back the long curtain he looked out, trying to think. Beneath him lay lawns and dark garden, and the undershadow of more distant trees. From the Place of Watch came the faint cry of an owl. The night air blew in on him softly. His tension and turmoil began to relax. . . .

Standing thus at the open window, he had the strange sensation that some one watched him from the door. He had had the same feeling before, but never so vividly as now. In the gloom of the evening, before the lights were on, he had more than once found himself glancing over his shoulder into the empty shadows of the corridor in which he walked, only to curse his landsman's nerves for playing tricks with him. He had never looked backward at sea.

He swung round sharply now, but there was nothing there; only the familiar furniture, and the light gleaming on the walls of the great old room. Then his vision was held by a partly open door. Who had dared to spy upon him at that hour of the night?

Swiftly he crossed to the door and looked out. There was only emptiness there. He was alone in the Gray Room, looking into a dim corridor which ran left and right. A revulsion of feeling swept over him. He told himself angrily that he must have left the door ajar when he entered the room. When would he learn to remember such things? The phantoms of imagination dissolved and vanished in the gloom.

But as he stood there on the threshold a noise reached his ears: a faint and indefinable sound coming, it seemed to him, from the other side of the house. Listening intently, he heard it again. Once more his tension snapped, but this time in a different way. Turning off the light

in his room, he closed the door softly behind him and walked quickly along the corridor towards the darkness of the east wing.

IV

That night Ailsa sought her room early in order to be alone.

Her thoughts were of the moment, and she did not look into the future at all. She knew she loved, and that was enough. Her clear eyes might see the unwisdom of her love, but that was something of small moment to her. For she was of the type which, loving, gives all. She had no questions to ask, no promises to exact. The instinct of sacrifice in love was part of her—something implanted in her heart. She loved him, and he had held her in his arms. Beyond that point her reflections did not go.

Thinking of that afternoon's walk she sat on, a tender vague smile on her lips, uncomprehended emotions and instincts stirring within her, holding her in thrall. It grew late, but time went its unheeded way as she sat there, her hands clasped before her, her eyes dark with dreams. At length she aroused herself with a little fluttering sigh, and slowly prepared for bed.

She had no inclination for sleep. Putting on a wrapper, she crossed the floor to the window. The curtains were not drawn, and she stood, looking out.

The downs were veiled and secretive beneath a low starless sky. It had been still and airless before, but a little wind had risen, and Ailsa knew from experience that it was likely to be stronger before long. The window curtains moved as the wind reached them, flapping a little in the quickening current of air. The wind breathed on her face.

As she stood thus in the stillness and the silence, she thought she heard a window being softly closed downstairs, almost beneath her room. The sound put her dreams to flight. She looked out again, but could see

nothing in the darkness which cloaked the downs. Who was likely to open or shut a window at Hilmerceux at that time of night? There were usually noises about the house when the wind rose, and she was not going to give way to nerves again, as she did when she thought she heard some one last night in the Place of Watch. She flushed a little as she thought of her hurried entry through the library window, and the look Violet Fieldhurst gave her. She would keep her head this time, at least.

She sat on the edge of her bed, listening again. A few minutes passed, and the silence remained unbroken. And then she heard a sound again, but this time like a footstep inside the house.

Fully resolved to keep her calmness at any cost, she nerved herself to go to the door and look out. She opened it wide, and the light fell into the corridor. And there, coming along the corridor towards her, was the figure of her secret dreams.

In the turmoil of her feelings she left her room and ran to him. He took her in his arms, and she nestled close to him, like a child. He held her tightly, and could feel her heart beating against his breast.

"Why, Ailsa!" he said, "What is it?"

"I heard a noise outside," she said, "like a window being opened. I thought some one was getting into the house downstairs."

"Are you sure?" he asked quickly.

"I thought so," she whispered.

They stood listening in silence, but the house was very still. He turned to her again.

"You must have been mistaken, dear," he said.

She shook her head.

"I do not think so," she replied.

"Which window was it?" he asked.

"One of the windows underneath my room, looking out on the downs. If you come with me I will show you."

She moved towards the open door. He stood where he was for a moment, then took an uncertain step in the

direction of the slender figure silhouetted there. Her face, uplifted towards him from the lighted doorway, was all that he saw just then. Her hair shone like gold, falling around the polished whiteness of her throat. She did not move. Thus they stood, in the sombre quietude of the empty wing. As he looked at her in her innocence he knew he dared not trust himself with her then.

She was waiting for him. He went a little nearer.

"No, Ailsa, I will not come in. You had better go to bed. You need not be afraid. I will look round downstairs before I go to bed."

She smiled with happy eyes.

"I am not afraid now that you are here," she said, and her voice had a soft thrill in it.

He took her in his arms again, kissing her twice. Then he let her go and pushed her gently inside the room.

"Goodnight, dear," he said.

The door closed gently behind her, and he was alone in the shadowy corridor.

CHAPTER XXI

LEAVES OF MEMORY

I

At dinner next night conversation was desultory. The eye of Dick Aldious, attuned to fine shades, saw that the hostess was a little distraught. Her manner was perfect as ever, but her poise showed the slight edge of strain. But no one else seemed to notice it, and Dick did his best to keep small-talk flowing. After coffee he and Violet went out on the terrace for cigarettes. The heir, with a brief word of apology, left the dining-room. Alone with Ailsa, Lady Hilmerceux paused on her own way out.

"Ailsa," she said, "come to me in half an hour's time."

Her tone was unusual. The girl gave her a startled look.

"Yes, Lady Hilmerceux," she murmured.

Ailsa's nervous glance gave her a momentary compunction, then her face hardened with the thought of what she knew. Turning away, she left the room. She wished to be alone; to settle the problem of the girl's future before she spoke to her again. And there were other problems too.

Almost unconsciously her footsteps led her to the picture gallery upstairs. In that dim and pictured privacy she stood before the portrait of one with whom she shared a secret memory of the past. For long she had thought the secret safely hidden, because the man was dead. But this night she was not so sure. Sin did not die so easily. The consequence lived on.

Looking up at the portrait now, she mused upon that distant episode of long ago. He had lied to her about it at the time, dismissing it with a smile as mere village

scandal. And she? She had smothered her doubts for the sake of pride: her pride in arms at the humiliating thought of having shared his love with a village girl, the sweetheart of a shepherd on his brother's estate. And so it ended then. The fuller revelation was reserved until a few months back, when the little old woman had come to her at Hilmerceux with her story of amorous passages on the downs with Harry Hilmerceux forty years before.

Dignity had upheld her during that shameful recital. But she had winced inwardly as the other mumbled of moonlit rambles and kisses of years ago (kisses on that toothless mouth—pah!), talking with her cunning Sussex glance upon her, prepared to go farther or leave the rest unspoken—just as the reception accorded to her pleading seemed to require. The object of her visit was to beseech the interest of the mistress of Hilmerceux in her granddaughter. "Mister Harry" had promised her he would "always be good to her," but he went to Cornwall and was drowned shortly after making that promise, and her husband was drowned with him too. She had no complaint on the latter score. The "big house" had continued to pay his wages to her ever since, and let her bide on in the cottage rent free. Her fears were for the future of her granddaughter. What was to become of Ailsa after her death? She seemed to think those kisses of a long-dead past gave her a claim there as well.

And her hearer had recognized it. She had promised to do something for the friendless girl, partly because she was anxious to leave the remainder of the disreputable secret untold, and be rid of this old woman who eyed her with a servile yet conspiratorial air, as if they shared something in common of this hidden past—which, indeed, was true. For she had loved Harry Hilmerceux as well. She had always loved him. Gladly would she have married him if he had asked her, but he never did. As it was, he was married at the time he made secret love to her, though she did not know it then. The disclosure of that early and secret marriage came later, after he had disappeared

and she was married to his brother. For the rest, Ailsa's grandmother had guessed her secret, or part of it. Had the dead man told her anything in those walks on the downs, forty years before? She shivered a little at that thought, standing before his picture now. It was a relief now to remember that the woman was dead too.

The promise to her had been fulfilled. She had been even better than her word, though the reasons which had prompted her to bring Ailsa to Hilmerceux were not quite clear to herself. Impelled by some secret instinct to look upon the other woman's face in death she had gone to the cottage on the downs, and the girl's charm and simplicity had won her heart. In some inscrutable way they seemed to lessen the ugliness of that ancient intrigue, though this implicit presumption of the grandmother's early beauty did not lessen her disgust at the thought of Harry Hilmerceux stooping so low. She looked at that phase of it through a woman's eyes.

In part, then, the invitation to the young girl was impulse. But the impulse was mingled with other motives less spontaneous and unselfish. She realized that she was a lonely woman with age drawing near; living alone in a great empty house, with no company but memory. So she had brought Ailsa to Hilmerceux, and treated her almost like a daughter, in exchange for the girl's youth and companionship. It had seemed an excellent arrangement. She had grown fond of the girl, whose young beauty and virginal freshness had imparted a touch of spring to the winter sadness of the old house.

Now she was faced with a different situation: with a mischief of which she had been warned when it was too late. Would it have availed anything if her eyes had been opened before? She doubted it. The evil went deeper than even Lemartine knew. Heredity was at work here. The taint was in the blood on both sides. The girl had the blood of her wanton grandmother in her; and the boy was of the Hilmerceux breed. The men of the house were hot-blooded lovers; reckless voluptuaries where a pretty

face was at play—all of them. It was an inherent strain of the blood which could never be eradicated—let the decay of the house of Hilmerceux bear sinister witness to the fact! Before her eyes the misery of forty years before was repeating itself in the same weariful, familiar shape. And what was she to do—where look for aid? A bitter, ironic smile curved her lips. There could be no help when the old leaven was working. And it was already too late. . . .

The wraith of the past hovered above her as she stood in the dim picture gallery with her eyes fixed on the framed dark face. Of the man nothing but a painted enigmatic smile remained, but his sin survived. Forty years before she had stood with him in this darkened room, his arms around her, his lips on hers. And it had seemed to her then that love was eternal, triumphing over time. Fool! She was wrong. Love and passion perished, like the flesh in which their fire ran. But the evil wrought by passion lived on.

At the sound of a footstep on the polished floor she looked quickly round. Harry had entered, not expecting to find her there. His eyes went from her to the picture before which she stood. She broke the silence.

"Harry," she said quietly, "I want to speak to you. Please shut the door."

He obeyed her without speaking, and she watched him with cold eyes. Slowly he returned to where she stood.

"Let us sit down," she said.

She led the way to two antique chairs in a nook. He sat down opposite her, and waited for her to speak. Her slow glance enveloped him. He was conscious of the unusual gravity of her look, and wondered what was to be the subject of their conversation.

On that point she did not leave him long in doubt. She came to it at once with her first sentence, characteristically, without any preparation of approach.

"I want to speak to you about Ailsa," she began.

He was so far from expecting this opening that he was completely taken aback, and showed it.

"I don't quite understand what you mean."

"I think you do. You and Ailsa have been seen much alone together. There has been talk—unpleasant talk."

"By whom?"

He spoke carefully, wondering how much she knew.

"By friends who have stayed here: some of our guests—your guests."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"If you are going on mere gossip—" he began.

But she checked him.

"I have more to go upon than that."

"Oh!" was his surprised rejoinder.

She waited for him to continue, but he said nothing more. She was constrained to go on:

"You appear to regard it as a small matter. So it is, I suppose, from a young man's point of view. But you are treating this girl unfairly. You should have remembered the difference in your respective positions."

"What are they?"

"You know very well," she rejoined. "You are the head of an ancient house. Ailsa is merely a village girl—the granddaughter of a shepherd of the downs."

"And three months ago I was second mate of a tramp steamer," he replied.

"That is beside the point," she said coldly. "You are in England now, and in a position which entails upon you the obligation of trying to act as an English gentleman. Indeed, you owe that much to yourself, if not to your house. In England there is a vast difference between your social position and that of Ailsa."

"You have treated her like an equal—in fact, like a daughter—here."

"She is neither the one nor the other, but a simple girl from a cottage on the downs. And my attitude to Ailsa has nothing to do with yours, which springs from a different motive. You are harming her and

yourself as well. You are acting foolishly, especially with your marriage in view."

"My marriage?" he interrogated, in a curious tone.

"Yes—your marriage. Have you forgotten what I asked you last night to think over?"

"I have thought about what you said, but I do not care for Miss Fieldhurst."

Her glance deepened.

"Perhaps you find Ailsa more interesting at present, because she is more pliant. That may be your idea of love. The males of the house have always been men of pleasure, and you appear not to be exempt from the failing—so much is clear to me now. It's bred in the bone of all of you. Ailsa is weak too. It's in her blood also."

"Stop!" he cried. "I will not listen to this."

"You must listen to what I have to say," she went on, with a sad composure more impressive than anger. "I want you to know the truth about your grandfather, who seems to live once more in you. Forty years ago he made love to Ailsa's grandmother, and now, forty years after, the same thing is happening again. You are your grandfather in more ways than one, and the girl is her grandmother over again—a soft and wanton Sussex wench. It's in the blood on both sides. The Hilmerceux men! Not one of them ever played a woman fair—no, not one. Look at you! You come from abroad—reared outside the tradition, knowing nothing of your family, as you said last night. But the tradition and the blood are there, whether you think so or not. The taint is in the blood—the same taint in all of you—and it always comes out. I suppose it would be useless to appeal to your generosity—your sense of chivalry—by reminding you that this girl is an orphan, and quite alone in the world? No; that kind of appeal falls on deaf ears in the case of a Hilmerceux, where a pretty face is concerned. Besides, it is too late."

"I cannot have you think that," he said suddenly. "I love Ailsa."

He started upright, and looked full into her eyes. She merely nodded contemptuously.

"Doubtless you do—in your way: the Hilmerceux way. But it won't last long. Meanwhile, for all our sakes, I must ask you to discontinue your present line of conduct. But I shall see to that."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

She gave him a level glance.

"I have heard of your visit to the cottage yesterday afternoon. You were seen in the wood."

"By whom?"

"You left the horses standing by the fence. Apparently you did not care who saw you. That did not matter so much. But last night, in your own house, was a very different thing."

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"I know you were in the east wing at an hour when you should have been in bed. What took you there I do not wish to explain. I feel I mistrust you now, and all this grieves me very much."

She left him without another word, moving away quickly, the majesty of her composure holding her up until she was clear of the room. He stood staring after her, but she did not look back. In the perfect stillness he sat down beneath the picture to think over what she had said.

II

In that moment of conflict within him the truth was made clear. If until then he had been unconscious of baseness of motive in his infatuation for Ailsa, he knew now by the light of this revelation that it had been there all the time. This disclosure of a forgotten and sordid story had helped him to understand. In that sense it acted as a warning, though not in the way Lady Hilmerceux had hoped. For to know was to be forewarned; forewarned against himself. If the taint of heredity was his, he would

reap as his forefathers had reaped, if he sowed in their fashion. Passion died, a thing of a moment, but the seed remained. Love was something stronger and deeper, and infinitely more tender, than the mere gratification of the flesh.

Pondering over the events of the previous night, he asked himself if he loved Ailsa in this manner? He thought of her with longing still, but in a different and purer way. It was the birth—though he did not know that—of the feeling which outlasts the flesh. But (and he was aware of this) his whole being revolted with loathing against the doctrine that the dead could hand down to the living a taint beyond the power of the spirit to overcome. That was a corrupting and desolating thought. If one believed that, then everything was gone—everything for which humanity stood. There would be nothing to fight for. He did not believe it. And he felt that the answer was plain, if one only had faith. It was borne in upon him that love rose triumphant over evil—triumphant even over such a malevolent heritage as this. For love was immortal, but the evil of heritage lived only in perishing flesh. Love was the conqueror of all things, even of death itself. And he knew that he loved Ailsa, as she loved him. He recognized that in his love for her his own hope of salvation lay. Nothing else counted in the least: Hilmerceux, inheritance, tradition, money. She was far more to him than these things. His hope for the future was written in her clear eyes.

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He came out of his reverie with a start to remember that he had forgotten an appointment with the steward downstairs. He got up from his seat and left the gallery now, walking quickly until he reached the corridor and the door of the steward's room.

Radford had been waiting for an hour or more. But his face showed no sign of impatience when the young man entered the room. He had everything ready and in order

for the business in hand. Documents were laid out on the bureau to be pursued and signed: an important lease, an order authorizing the sale of Happy Thorn Farm, and papers of a minor matter or two. With a muttered apology for his lateness, Harry listened to the steward's exposition of these things and sat down at the bureau to sign the papers.

The steward handed him a pen, and he hastily affixed his signature, his mind busy with other things. Radford stood by in silence. When the two documents were signed he blotted them with care and put them away in the safe.

"Anything else, Radford?"

"That is all, Lord Hilmerceux."

Harry arose to go. As he did so, his eyes ranged carelessly over the large open bureau. The light fell on neatly tied letters and papers in apertures, and the dropped pen lying across the white blotting pad. A row of manuals on farming and sheep-breeding stood on the top of the bureau. Beside the books lay a spray of flowers, such as a person walking might idly pluck,—and afterwards cast aside. The slender stems and purplish bloom held the young man's eye and stirred his consciousness in a perplexing way. Where had he seen the flowers before?

The answer came immediately. The room and its contents faded away. For a moment he seemed to see green sloping downs, rooks circling high, and a girl's figure framed in a tall growth of such flowers near a cottage door. For a space he was silent in thought. Then he turned to the steward.

"What is the name of this flower, Radford? I don't think I've seen it in the garden here."

He pointed to the spray on the bureau. The steward glanced at it, and quietly replied:

"Jordan would think that too common for Hilmerceux. It's a favorite in cottage gardens because it blooms early, and remains in flower for months."

Harry picked up the bloom and looked at it.

"And what is it called?" he asked.

“Honesty—purple honesty is the Sussex name.”

Their eyes met. The steward turned indifferently away. With a faint uneasy prevision of the truth, the heir's own glance went about the orderly room, going from the bureau at which he had been sitting to the window at the far end. It was a long narrow French window, reaching to the floor, and veiled with heavy purple curtains which at that moment were stirring faintly in the air. Stirred . . . the window was open——

In a flash Harry understood. Hilmerceux was built on two elevations, and on that side of the house the rooms beneath the east wing downstairs were level with the downs. The window of the room in which he stood opened on the downs. And before him was the man who had seen him with Ailsa in the wood, and who later had watched the girl's room from the darkness of the downs outside. Her scare at the Place of Watch two nights before stood explained. The same eyes had watched her, guessing why she had gone there. And there were other incidents, earlier still. . . .

It was all of a piece. There was nothing supernatural here; no ghost; but the meanest of living things, a creature who stooped to play the spy in order to take his tale to Lady Hilmerceux. Radford was the contemptible being who had done this inconceivable thing: the immaculate steward who had saved the estate from ruin, and was to be his right hand in the years to come!

A kind of horror of the man swept over him. He burnt with the desire to accuse him then and there. But almost in the act of uttering the words, he stifled them in his throat. With a fierce exultation he remembered in time that the steward was in his power. He was master of Hilmerceux, with the power to punish spying stewards when he thought fit. He held the whip hand, so let him keep his head! There were depths beyond the treacherous surface into which as yet he could not see. He would take time for cool reflection before deciding

upon action. Instinctively he felt the need of keeping a guard on himself.

These thoughts ran quickly through his mind as he stood silent there. Radford waited quietly until he chose to go, apparently preoccupied with the contents of some paper he held in his hand. When the heir at length turned to leave the steward's room, the eyes of the two men met once again. The heir caught sight of something strange and savage in the depths of the steward's eyes, like the glimpse of a beast springing against bars. It passed like a flash, but Harry realized that the other had read his thoughts and understood what was passing in his mind. At that moment the heir thought he saw on the steward's face the flickering shadow of an ironical smile. Once more accusation leaped impulsively to his lips, and again he got control of himself in time. Turning quickly on his heel, he left the room.

CHAPTER XXII

“DARKNESS COMPREHENDED IT NOT”

I

Hilmerceux loomed blackly in the dark stillness of the downs. From a few windows lights beamed faintly, falling in diminishing ray upon the sleeping gardens and lawns. Beyond, the lake lay still, and the park was a vague outline of shrouded trees. All around were the downs, in deep gloom.

Mr. Lemartine, tempted by the soft fragrance of the air to smoke a last cigar in the summer night, absently noted these things. The lights told him that all the household had not yet retired: the living inmates, that was, and not those incorporeal forms who perhaps sat alone in the sheeted desolation of the empty rooms, brooding as sadly as the living, but without hope now of retrieving lost years. This thought came unaccountably to the lawyer at the sight of the blank windows above, these sad dim eyes and dumb witnesses of the old house's strange and forgotten past. As he looked, one of the lights disappeared, and a faint rustling sigh came from the trees, as if a wind in passing whispered that some one's hope and happiness had been extinguished too. . . .

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders impatiently, annoyed that such idle fancies should come unbidden to his head. Turning from where he had been standing he walked some little way further on. He reached the confines of the garden. The downs were before him, and on his right hand he could see the east wing of the house. It was in darkness above, but downstairs a single light shone. Mr. Lemartine knew from whose window it came. Within, Radford worked for the old house and a new Lord Hil-

merceux, striving by solitary toil to snatch a little more from the light-hearted improvidence of the past. He felt inclined to go into the steward's room for a talk, but decided not to. Why should he disturb another with work to do?

In an unusual frame of mind, Mr. Lemartine continued his stroll, retracing his steps until he again reached the lawns. Near him rose the terrace, and above it a shaft of light from an upper curtained window fell like an arrow of gold at his feet. The light came from Lady Hilmerceux's bedroom.

The lawyer glanced up at it and walked on. Still disinclined for sleep, he had the fancy to smoke another cigar by the placid brink of the lake. He walked down the slope until he reached the path which ran round the grassy edge. Here he stood smoking by the old bridge which rose in a gray span above the water to the silent park on the farther side.

It was a quiet spot, but the spirit of the past which it breathed did little to soothe the lawyer's mind. He felt vaguely disturbed and uneasy, and some chance remarks of Dick Aldious, made earlier that night in the smoking-room, came back to him as he stood there. Aldious had declared that all this loveliness and serenity, Hilmerceux and all it stood for, was merely a dying tradition of the past—a belated survival of mediævalism—doomed to ultimate extirpation and extinction soon. Modernity decreed its uselessness, and modernity would clear it away. It belonged to a spacious era, and spaciousness in England was a thing of the past. From the modern point of view of a democratic and overcrowded England, this ancestral architecture and beauty took up too much room, and perforce must go.

Was this really true? It seemed to Mr. Lemartine like a picture of the betrayal of England, and yet he knew that human nature acted like that. What one generation valued, another destroyed. The past, and the things of the past, were for ever being swept away. All human

creation was futile, if it came to that. Yet England! The one spot of ancient waning beauty in an ugly modernized world. . . . Lady Hilmerceux thought the foundations of Hilmerceux had been laid anew. To what end had she dreamed, if the writing was on the wall?

Standing by the lake, his eye sought the melancholy outline of the house, showing dark and silent against the sky. The solitary light still gleamed from the upper room, pointing like a wavering finger to the Place of Watch, stretching towards it across the sloping lawns, and fading away at last near the ironwork of the ancient gates. The Place of Watch! That was another relic of the past. He pictured it in the old days, a motionless figure within, waiting for the signal of death. From the room where the light shone it may have come, floating sullenly from the curtained chink, touching the grass here and there, and fading away in the darkness at last, as it was doing now. It was a strange ceremony, this keeping of the Watch, forgotten now this hundred years. For how many of the Hilmerceux had the hands of the great clock-face been twisted round? How many had been stopped in the winding drive, on their way to the grave, by the mournful cry: "Does my lord pass?" . . . Ah, well, he hoped the old house was not to pass, as they had passed. Why should it, with a new heir? He shut out the prophetic words of Dick Aldious as heartless and cold. He tried to discern a happy era for the house; embarrassments sloughed, past improvidence overcome. Hilmerceux mellow with content and radiant with children's voices.

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With a start he thought he heard a sound from the Place of Watch: a faint, creaking jar, as if some one had opened the rusty grille. He took a few steps towards where it stood, dark and deserted, in the bend of the drive, but the noise did not reach him again. The outline of the grille was visible across the short stretch of grass, but no form, ghostly or human, could he see within the black

shadow of the bars. He told himself imagination had played him false, as it had Ailsa two nights ago.

Looking at his watch by the glowing end of his cigar, he found it was almost eleven. The night had grown colder. As he turned towards the house he saw the light in Lady Hilmerceux's window go out. The front of the house was in darkness.

As he entered the hall he encountered the housekeeper, who came forward to close the door. She carefully locked and bolted it.

"I am locking up to-night, sir," she said. "All the servants are in bed."

"You keep early hours, Mrs. Perrins—country hours," the lawyer observed. "I hope I've not kept you up, waiting for me to come in?"

"Not at all, sir. I had plenty to do, and it's just gone eleven."

"Good night, Mrs. Perrins."

"Good night, sir. It's a very dark night outside."

"Very dark—as you say, Mrs. Perrins," murmured the lawyer absently, passing on his way upstairs.

The housekeeper waited at the foot until he ascended before switching off the staircase light.

II

Mr. Lemartine went to his room and to bed, but could not sleep. The restlessness he had felt outside increased in the solitude of his room. After lying and tossing for a while, he switched on the light, and got out of bed. Putting on a dressing-gown, he picked up a book he had brought from downstairs, and sat down by the bedside to read. But his book did not please him. It was a modern novel left behind by one of the guests, and after skimming through a few pages, the lawyer put it aside. The feminine heroics on sex which made up the story wearied him infinitely by their implied suggestion that human life consisted of nothing better than animal instincts and acts.

Perhaps, from the feminine point of view, it did. An easy matter to loose passion on paper, letting it flow from a fountain pen, in the comfort of a book-lined room! The grim retribution of wrong-doing did not lie in wait for the hectic creations of a writer's brain. Right and wrong, reason, self-control, modesty, conscience: such things might safely be disregarded in a book. . . . But not in life—no; never in life. If they were disregarded then, they exacted retribution in their own time and way, as passion's fools learned to their cost. All lawyers knew this to be true. The steel boxes of a lawyer's office were choked with records of such vengeance working out in course of time, sometimes upon the wrongdoers, more often upon innocent descendants entangled in the coil, yes, unto the third and fourth generation. Again, the law knew how terribly those words were true. Here was the hidden sin of the Hilmerceux, buried deeply forty years before, stretching out bony hands from the grave, seeking for other victims yet. Did such things never pass into oblivion? Were some sins held as never atoned for, by the inscrutable invisible power which adjusts the balance of human right and wrong?

These thoughts flowed through Mr. Lemartine's head. And then he dropped into sleep as he sat there.

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He awoke after an unknown lapse of time with stiffened limbs and a feeling of cold. A cold wind was blowing into the room, and the open window was rattling sharply, as if the frame were being shaken by an importunate hand. The lawyer was also aware of another sensation, like the touch of frail and gentle fingers upon his face. Fully awake, he stared about him, and saw the lace curtains floating lightly around his head. Asking himself what folly possessed him to fall asleep at an open window at his time of life, Mr. Lemartine rose hastily to close it. As he did so, he looked out.

The wind had lulled again, and it was very dark and

still, but clouds were moving up from the south. Beyond the garden the downs showed in shadowy outline against a lowering sky. Beneath the window, terrace and lawns were veiled in blackness. These things Mr. Lemartine saw in the moment of silence, and then the wind sprang up again. He put his hand up to close the window. As he did so he heard a low cry a little distance away, and then some words:

"Ah, the horror of it . . . the horror. . . ."

The broken sentence floated in the open window from the thick curtain of the impenetrable night, filling the hearer with a kind of sickening fear. The words were faintly whispered, not cried aloud. They trailed off into a muffled silence, as if some unseen power had overpowered the full revelation of animal fear which lies concealed in each lonely human heart. But the checked utterance seemed to echo and whisper interminably in the bright stillness of the lighted room where the lawyer stood listening with pallid face. He knew that the sound and the words had come from a room on that floor, not far away.

He listened a little longer, but there was no further sound. The wind had risen sharply, and wailed at the window-pane. He closed the window quickly and crossed to the door. The handle turned in his fingers and the door opened wide.

Outside the darkness flowed like a tide, and in it he seemed to discern something vanishing with noiseless fantastic speed towards the deep shadows which muffled the head of the stairs. But his mind swung back to sanity when he looked in the other direction and saw a gleam of light through a half-open door. And Mr. Lemartine knew it was the door of Lady Hilmerceux's room.

What had happened? Rallying his faculties, the lawyer went quickly to the room. Within, the light still gleamed. The lawyer knocked lightly. After a moment of perfect stillness he knocked again, and said:

"Lady Hilmerceux, is there anything wrong?"

In the silence the door swayed further open, revealing

a portion of the room. Mr. Lemartine could hear the blind rattling sharply against the window-pane. But there was no other sound. Anxiety struggling with fear in his heart, he passed into the room.

Within, the radiance of a shaded cluster light overhead fell on the silver articles of the dressing-table, the rose-silk window curtains, and the deeper crimson of the carpet on which the lawyer stood. But Mr. Lemartine's eyes sought the distant whiteness of the bed.

Lady Hilmerceux was lying there dead. The lawyer realized that before he reached the bedside. She reclined in a sitting posture against the lace pillows, one hand outstretched as if in fear. The lace around her neck had fallen away, disclosing a thin gold chain with a diamond trinket attached. The fingers of her other hand touched the trinket now, as though it were a talisman which could ward off harm. The lawyer knew who had given her the keepsake, more than forty years before.

Mr. Lemartine, looking down with a face almost as white as the one upon which he gazed, realized instinctively that death had come to her in the nature of some terrible shock. Of that he felt sure. The soul had rent its way from its earthly covering in a passion of fear. It was as though some phantom of horror had revealed itself to her in the dead of night, something beyond human nature to endure. Her fixed gaze was a dread glimpse of the spirit in the last paroxysm of life, almost too unendurable to be borne. It was like looking into some dark ice-glazed depth and discerning unutterable things within. With groping hands the lawyer drew the curtains of the bed, and turned quickly away.

BOOK III

REAPING

CHAPTER XXIII

ABSENCE

I

Mr. Lemartine had rooms in the Middle Temple, reached by a dark entry between high gray walls, and across a courtyard to a venerable door. From the passage a dim flight of stairs led abruptly upward to a large outer office for clerks, with a smaller sanctum for Mr. Eastney within. Mr. Lemartine's own sanctum was next to his managing clerk's, with a communicating door; a square room of Victorian solidity and seclusion, which breathed the discreet and opulent atmosphere of the law. Here behind heavily curtained windows, surrounded by fine old prints on soberly reticent walls, Mr. Lemartine passed his days looking after his large and lucrative practice.

It was quiet and pleasant there that October morning, with the light of late summer streaming through the parted curtains into the rooms; so pleasant, that the lawyer, who had just entered, stood for a while at the window, looking down. Summer lingered that year, and England was dreaming in late October sunshine. Even into the heart of London the sun had forced its way, splashing with silver the narrow gray court, where sunlight so rarely came. There was a strip of grass beneath the window, a plane tree with some twittering birds, and on the worn flagged path pigeons drummed and cooed. A tortoiseshell cat lay asleep half in light, half in shadow, on a door step across the way.

A dark legal figure appeared from beneath the archway with downcast head, like a brooding rook, but otherwise the ancient court seemed deserted. The silence was broken only by the muffled sound of London's traffic

flowing all around, penetrating into the drowsy quietude of the court in a faint and murmuring drone, not unpleasant to hear.

Mr. Lemartine was aroused from his abstraction by the sound of the inner door opening. He turned his head as his managing clerk entered from the inner room, bearing the morning letters in his hand. Portly and sleek, with watchful greenish eyes set in a smooth round face, Mr. Eastney bore a superficial resemblance to some large, glossy cat richly nourished on the bountiful cream of the law. But that was in outward seeming only. Inwardly he had nothing in common with a lewd and lawless animal which leads a life of lazy days and disorderly nights. Mr. Eastney, in addition to being an excellent managing clerk who had been with his present employer for nearly forty years, was in his private capacity a reputable citizen of Conservative political views, who supported a wife and three grown-up daughters at Palmer's Green, from whence he traveled every morning by bus to Chancery-lane.

He crossed the carpeted room and purred a bland "Good morning" on the morning air. At the sight of him Mr. Lemartine left the pigeons and the sparrows to their own concerns and returned to his mahogany table and the business of the day.

"Good morning, Eastney," he said, as he settled himself in his comfortable chair. "Anything special this morning?"

The managing clerk arranged the opened correspondence in a neat pile on his master's table before replying.

"Nothing very special, sir. There is a letter from Linton and Buzzard in the Farquharson case. Sir Reginald is willing to pay his wife a thousand a year by private agreement, but he opposes any order by the court."

Mr. Lemartine nodded.

"That will be quite satisfactory. You had better step round to Linton and Buzzard's yourself, and arrange the details."

"Very good, sir. The only other urgent matter is a letter from Lord Hilmerceux, who writes to say that he would like an appointment at eleven o'clock."

"Very well, Eastney. Please bring Lord Hilmerceux in as soon as he arrives."

The managing clerk nodded, and went back into his own room.

Left to himself, Mr. Lemartine sank into thought. With the heir's letter in his hand his mind went back to a scene of more than twelve months before: the Sussex downs, dark yews, a church of sober gray, and the words of the burial service falling with a wailing note upon the calm, still summer air. He saw again the mourners by the graveside, and the people from the country-side standing a little distance away. Again he recalled the heir, as he had seen him that day, bearing himself quietly, looking down, bareheaded, alone and apart. But when the words of the service ended, and the vicar bent his head in prayer, the young man had looked up quickly, and across the grave his eyes and the lawyer's had met.

Mr. Lemartine had often wondered since what that glance had meant. His grief at his bereavement had seemed genuine and sincere, but in that brief glance there was more of restlessness than sorrow. Was he thinking of Ailsa at that moment, with the knowledge that the distance between them was widened by the deep chasm of a grave? For it was through Lady Hilmerceux that the girl had left Hilmerceux; on that point there could be no doubt. She had gone two days before the funeral, departing in fugitive fashion at day-break, without a word of leavetaking or farewell, vanishing, as it were, into thin air. There was a little speculation and surmise in the servants' quarters, and—in the library—a bitter outburst by the heir. He had wanted Ailsa found at once.

But the lawyer had felt then there was scant promise of that, and time had proved him right. The girl was

her own mistress, quite alone in the world, and accountable to no one for her actions. If she wished to leave Hilmerceux it was her free choice, whatever the relationship between her and the heir. At the time Mr. Lemartine had thought these two young people better apart, however cruel the means of severance which put them asunder. Heredity was a deadly force, and where the portents were unfavorable to love separation was best. So Mr. Lemartine had thought at the time. The girl had the soft pliability of her type, and the boy was of a breed whose weakness was best protected against itself. But afterwards he was doubtful whether he had read the situation aright. The first doubt had formed in his mind when he encountered that chance glance across the grave, and it had been intensified when they were alone in the library before he left Hilmerceux the following day. Harry, speaking with sad eyes fixed on the open window and green downs, had urged him to do his utmost to find Ailsa—by any means. She had not gone away of her own free will, he said. Of that he was quite sure, and she must be found.

The lawyer merely said that he would do his utmost. At that the young man gave him a sombre glance.

“I shall stay on here until I hear from you. If you don’t find her I shall go and look for her myself. . . .”

It was then for the first time the lawyer realized he was confronting in the heir a true Hilmerceux, a breed not easily swayed or thwarted. “A Hilmerceux never turns aside.” He remembered at that moment that it was he who had first quoted the family motto to the heir. And this boy, brought up abroad, had the mingled doggedness and impetuosity of his ancestors, when it came to the point. The interview taught the lawyer something more. For the first time he had a glimpse of the depth of his infatuation for the absent girl, and he wondered as he turned away if the dead woman had acted with ultimate wisdom in putting them apart.

Mr. Lemartine had no doubt, then or now, that the

act had been hers. She had set her mind on the early marriage of the heir, and with Ailsa on the spot that might have been difficult to bring about. Doubtless she believed that her absence would facilitate her plans, so she had sent the girl away. He did not know what story had been told or promise exacted to weigh so powerfully after death, but with a girl of that type the thing was easy enough. The lawyer's worldly-wise eyes saw the girl's soul as in a mirror, quivering, sensitive, clear. Unworldly. It was all summed up in that one word. Because she was unworldly she was ready and eager to sacrifice everything for love. Because of her love for Harry it had been easy to induce her to sacrifice herself by going away. Lady Hilmerceux had worked on her feelings in some way before she died. Not by a mere appeal alone, perhaps. Mr. Lemartine, discerning so much seemed to see deeper still. . . . In a world where the weaker must go to the wall, had this thing been well done?

Weaker? Who was to say where human weakness or strength lay—again, in a world like this? This girl, weak with the passion of tenderness and love, had the fearlessness and nobility of character which makes for true strength. It was more than a year since she had gone away, and she had not been seen or heard of since. But he still continued the search for her.

Thinking over these things after the lapse of time, the lawyer had a better understanding of that dimly remembered glance in the young man's eyes. The prescience of love had revealed to him that Ailsa would take this unflinching course, and that time would creep on without sign of her. His look by the graveside had shown his despair and his inward bitterness at the cruel injustice of this stroke of fate, which by untoward death had robbed him of his best chance of finding happiness.

If Lady Hilmerceux had not died, would he have been any happier? There are occasions in which suspense and even despair are to be preferred to a knowledge of the

truth. In this case death had thrown a dark veil over a secret which might probably never be known. Musingly the lawyer recalled the few broken words he had heard Lady Hilmerceux utter with her dying breath, and the look of horror on her dead face when he went to her room. At the moment he had believed that some dreadful impalpable force of evil had brought about her death, but afterwards he had not been so sure. Face to face with the medical verdict that the dead woman had had a feeble hold on life, his first sinister impression had weakened as his emotion ebbed and common sense returned. And it was soon made clear to him that the impression was his alone. No one else had seen what he had glimpsed in her fading eyes; not even the housekeeper, who had loved the dead woman well, and was the first to stand at his side in that hour of death. Grief and dismay had been manifest, but nothing more. Then came the discovery, previously unknown, that Lady Hilmerceux's life had for long been at the mercy of an enemy within her—a throbbing, remorseless enemy which had killed her without warning in the night. She might have died thus at any time, the doctors said.

So, after all, what he had seen and heard in the silence of the night might have been nothing more than the last stifled expression of anguish, in the very jaws of death, at the thought of a calamitous entanglement between the much-loved heir and the descendant of one whom his grandfather had wronged forty years before. If the tenuity of the thread which had bound Lady Hilmerceux to life was so frail, how could he with uncertain mind proclaim to the world a belief that it had been snapped in some dreadful way? Such a suspicion would have caused scandal, surmise, and vulgar talk, but it would have achieved no other end. Actually he had nothing to go upon beyond the faint utterance of a few ambiguous words and his own uncanny thought. He believed now that silence had been best. True to the precedent of his profession, he had been guided by caution and discretion in

the management of her affairs unto the last. He had nothing to reproach himself with on that score.

Standing by the open window, with the sunlight flecking its silver upon his fallow face, Mr. Lemartine wondered what this unexpected visit of the heir might mean. He had seen little of him since Lady Hilmerceux's death, but when last at Hilmerceux in his absence some months before he had caught fragments of gossip which did not bode for good. Apparently the new Lord Hilmerceux had not played his part for popular support. There were whispers in the county about him: talk of eccentricity, and wildness, and the Hilmerceux blood. How far such things were true Mr. Lemartine could not pretend to say. This information reached him in a haphazard way, a nervous and distraught housekeeper contributing the chief share. It was not much, when all was said and done. There were stories of long absences and unexpected returns, and of mad midnight gallops and motor-drives across the downs. Hilmerceux was kept shut up. For weeks at a time its owner would be absent, and when there he kept solitary house, deliberately avoiding the gentry around him, and all the callers who came. This flouting of the countryside had set the scandalmongers baying in a pack. Calumny started hot foot after him, and ill-wishers were abroad.

He remained absent during the lawyer's visit, and his housekeeper did not know where he was. Mrs. Perrins wept when asked; the steward merely shook his head. They had seen little enough of him since his accession. The housekeeper said, between sobs, that Lord Hilmerceux rarely stayed at Hilmerceux. He just came and went—like the wind.

Musing over these things now, the lawyer wondered what would be the outcome of it all. He had heard enough to make him uneasy, but he did not see what he could do. The young man was at an age when he needed guidance. He was too young to shoulder his heavy responsibilities alone, but who could interfere? He was

lord of Hilmerceux, the sole heir and master there. If he was coming to him that morning for disinterested counsel and advice, both were at his disposal for what they were worth. But Mr. Lemartine doubted whether he was coming there in quest of guidance that day. Youth never sought to profit by the experience of age. And, indeed, there was no reason why it should, for what was age, after all, but the negative enlightenment of the bitter meaning of life? Mr. Lemartine sighed at the sadness of youth, compelled to master painfully the sorry sum of the years before the scant total of human wisdom could be ascertained.

The inner door again, and the managing clerk crossed the carpet as noiselessly as a cat.

"Lord Hilmerceux is here, sir."

"Very good, Eastney. Will you bring him in?"

CHAPTER XXIV

REACTIONS

I

Advancing to greet Harry as he entered the room, the lawyer thought that he looked worried, and very tired about the eyes. The young man held out his hand with a smile.

"I have come to discuss my affairs with you, Lemartine," he said.

"I am very glad to see you," Mr. Lemartine replied.

"Thanks!" He sat down in the proffered chair, and looked around him at the dark and curtained room, so quiet and remote from London's noise close by. Then he faced the lawyer.

Mr. Lemartine's smile seemed in keeping with the friendliness of the room, encouraging an atmosphere of intimate talk.

"How are things at Hilmerceux?" he asked pleasantly.

"The same as usual, when I was last there," was the absent response. "It's Hilmerceux I've come up to speak to you about—partly. You know that I have been much away?"

The lawyer bowed his head.

"I suppose you have had no news of Ailsa, Lemartine?" continued Harry.

The elder man gave a slight shake of the head.

"No, I haven't," he replied gravely. "If I had I should have let you know at once."

The face of Lord Hilmerceux was difficult to read as he sat there.

"I did not call at Hilmerceux for letters on my way up," he said. "I motored from Bournemouth last night.

But I have given up the hope of hearing from her now. It was not about Ailsa alone that I came to see you. I have been trying to decide what to do next."

He paused, as if searching for words, then went on:

"I have been thinking about Hilmerceux."

Through another period of silence Mr. Lemartine waited expectantly. With an effort and a slight flush the heir's next words came:

"I have been wondering if it would be possible to sell the place."

Mr. Lemartine looked up quickly, wondering if he had heard aright, or if the words were spoken in joke. But in the eyes which met his own there was no hint of mirth—merely the shadow of a sad resolve.

"Sell Hilmerceux!" he exclaimed, in something like dismay. "Surely you are not speaking seriously, Lord Hilmerceux? Why, Hilmerceux has been in your family for centuries. As one who has had charge of the interests of your house for nearly fifty years, I say quite frankly that it would be a dreadful thing to do."

"That may be so, from one way of looking at it, but there is another point of view. I cannot live there now."

The lawyer thought before answering.

"Hilmerceux is a very beautiful mansion, but it is far too large for you, living by yourself," he said. "I can understand that. But the remedy is really in your own hands. You could have some guests. And later on you should marry. For the present—if I may take the privilege of a much older man to offer you advice—I think you would be wise if you spent more of your time there. Then you would become more accustomed to your surroundings. It is a pity for you to become a stranger in your own home. You would soon learn to love it, if you settled down. After all Hilmerceux is your birthright, you know. It seems almost unthinkable that you should contemplate parting with it."

"Other landowners are doing it," the heir replied.

Mr. Lemartine shrugged his shoulders.

"Because, unfortunately, they cannot afford the expense of a great estate under existing taxation," he replied. "You have not that excuse. Hilmerceux—if it were only disencumbered—is a comparatively inexpensive place to keep up."

The young man shook his head.

"It seems to me that the time is coming when the ancestral homes of England must go," he said, "when the old families will no longer be permitted to retain these great secluded domains."

"That time is not yet," rejoined the lawyer quickly.

"A social revolution is coming, doubtless, but so long as the English people are wisely governed they will never go to extreme lengths. Love of law and order is bred in English bones, which is something that many persons since the war are inclined to forget. We live in abnormal times, but the nation is sound at heart, thank God! But this talk of revolution is to wander from the question. Lord Hilmerceux, to talk of selling Hilmerceux seems almost like a . . ." He broke off abruptly, at loss for a fitting word.

"Like a betrayal, let us say," suggested the heir bitterly.

"No, no; I would not take it upon myself to go so far as that. But a weakness it certainly is—like going back upon your duty, as it were. The mere thought is enough to make your ancestors stir uneasily in their graves. You must forgive me if my words are too plain."

"Oh, I do not mind your plain speaking," replied the young man, in a rather weary tone. "I did not suppose when I came here that you would be able to see this through my eyes. In the first place, I do not think that I owe much to my ancestors, or the centuries which have gone. That seems to me to be altogether a mistaken idea, though I assure you, Lemartine, that I have thought it all over very carefully from that point of view. In the sense of tradition it is a betrayal, I suppose. But if I do not marry and die without an heir, the place will go to strangers

ultimately just the same, so what difference will a few years make? It comes to the same thing in the long run. Hilmerceux was a place of memories for Lady Hilmerceux, and it has become now a place of memories to me as well. I cannot stay in it. Lemartine—there are too many disturbing thoughts there. I want to get away from it.”

He spoke quietly, but firmly, as if from a mind fully made up. He looked suddenly older, with a gravity of a man beyond his years. The lawyer felt a quick pity for the loneliness and unhappiness in his face.

“You may think differently about Hilmerceux by and by,” he said. “It has been the home of your ancestors for centuries. It is your home by unbroken heritage and the traditions of the past. Surely such things mean something to you?”

“If they do, it is in a different way. They whisper of things best forgotten—of a heritage which has to be lived down. Whenever I’m there I am conscious of this: of a somber past which has overshadowed my own life. . . .”

He stopped short, but after a pause spoke again.

“Ever since I came to Hilmerceux I have been made the scapegoat of its past!”

He spoke with a note of irony which caused the lawyer to look at him in surprise. He went on:

“The past . . . the taint in the blood . . . these things have interfered in my life from the beginning, and in Ailsa’s, too. They dogged our footsteps like dark shadows from the first. We have been condemned to suffer for something that happened forty years ago, before we were born. And something was said to Ailsa before Lady Hilmerceux’s death which caused her to disappear. I do not know what it was, though I can guess. But there are some things better left unsaid. Why should Ailsa have been hurt so cruelly . . . she, who never harmed a living thing? For myself, it does not matter at all, if only she had been spared! For these reasons I want to sell Hilmerceux. I

do not share this obsession of the past. I am going to forget . . . forget Hilmerceux, and all. . . .”

Rising from his seat abruptly, he walked across to the window, and stood in the shadow of the curtain looking down on the strip of green. Mr. Lemartine watched him from his chair. Presently he left the window, and came slowly back to the table again.

“Lemartine, I will be frank with you. On the night Lady Hilmerceux died she spoke bitterly to me about Ailsa—and myself. She died believing I had misled Ailsa.”

Mr. Lemartine fingered his glasses a little nervously.

“Now you have told me this I must explain to you in return. It was I who spoke to Lady Hilmerceux about you and Miss Rose, though I did not go so far as your words imply. I repeated to her a few remarks made by several of your guests last year—gossip I overheard, in which the names of yourself and Miss Rose were coupled harmfully together. I have meant to touch upon this point before. Perhaps I did wrong in so speaking. If so, I can only express my regret and offer the poor excuse generally proffered by those who meddle in other people’s concerns—that it was well-meant. Besides, at that time I had no idea of your feelings for Miss Rose.”

For a while Harry sat silent, playing absently with a paper-knife on the table at his side. Then he spoke with an effort:

“It could not have been from what you said. Lady Hilmerceux heard something which went far deeper than that—something of which you knew nothing at all. She was told evil things by one who watched me, and wanted to do me harm.

“Who would do that?”

The question was followed by silence. Harry gave the lawyer a sidelong glance.

“I don’t know whether it is worth while going into that,” he said at length.

"Nevertheless, I should like to hear whom you suspect," persisted the lawyer.

"It was Radford, then, as you wish to know," said the other coldly, "and it is not suspicion—I am sure."

Mr. Lemartine looked at the heir.

"It is a wonder you have allowed him to remain at Hilmerceux as your steward if you thought that," he said.

Harry stared moodily at a ray of sunshine falling aslant the red carpet at his feet.

"I thought at first of sending him away. But, after all, he was no worse than others who believed the same thing, and the miserable business is done with now. Lady Hilmerceux is dead and Ailsa has disappeared. What does a disloyal steward—or a disloyal household, if it comes to that—matter to me?"

The lawyer glanced at him quickly with the feeling that he was keeping something in the background of his mind.

"Does Radford know that you suspect—that you think this?" he asked.

A faint, mirthless smile flickered momentarily in the young man's eyes.

"I fancy that he does," he replied.

"Then it is strange he should stay on at Hilmerceux if he guesses that," commented Mr. Lemartine, with something like curiosity in his voice.

Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps he also thinks it is all over now. Or it may be that he has no desire to quarrel with me if it can be helped. And he is really an admirable steward, as you yourself pointed out. So he remains at Hilmerceux—at present. I can part with him later if I think it necessary."

There was something behind this that Mr. Lemartine did not understand, but he was able to realize that the speaker was very unhappy and overstrung. Again a feeling of pity sprang up in him for the young man. When the lawyer spoke it was to revert to the earlier phase of their conversation.

"And now, about Hilmerceux, Lord Hilmerceux. Do you seriously wish me to take your instructions for the sale of it?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I came here for that purpose. I have given you my reasons."

The lawyer played with his pen on the blotting pad before him.

"There is no need for you to be alone. You could have company—the society of the county."

"I do not want the society of the county," rejoined the other wearily. "I have no grudge against it, but guests would bore me and I should bore them. I want to sell the place and be done with it."

"If that is your irrevocable determination I have nothing more to say. I have no doubt a suitable purchaser for the place can be easily found. I have one or two possibilities in my mind at the present moment. But supposing you do sell the place, and Miss Rose were unexpectedly to return, what then?"

At these words Harry looked up quickly.

"Why do you say that?" he answered. "What should bring her back there, to a place where she was made profoundly unhappy by me—by every one? She will never return."

"Ah, well," said the lawyer dryly, "she might change her mind about that, you know. Women have been known to change their minds before to-day."

Harry shook his head.

"Ailsa will not go back to Hilmerceux. She suffered too much wrong there."

"You will be the best judge of her feelings," returned Mr. Lemartine, after a pause. "Still, it seems to me there might just be a chance of it, if she loves you yet. But apart from that—yes, quite apart from that altogether—I wish you would give further consideration to this thought of selling Hilmerceux. If you must go away it would be better to rent it—to lease it—though I don't think you ought even to do that. You might in reason wait

awhile, before coming to such a momentous decision."

"If I thought—" muttered Harry uncertainly.

"And the present is a bad time for selling," went on Mr. Lemartine, "with all this talk of a Socialistic Government coming along—though I'm bound to say that their accession to power is not likely to increase the value of your place. And England is no longer a rich country to-day. But I want you to consider the matter on other and more sentimental grounds. It seems to me you have been away from Hilmerceux so much that when you go there you feel like a stranger in your own house. Because of that I strongly urge you to defer your decision until you have tried living there for a longer space of time. I think you owe Hilmerceux that much, and, besides, your duty lies there."

Harry sat thoughtful for a moment.

"Lemartine, I will follow your advice," he said, rising suddenly as he spoke. "Hilmerceux shall have another chance—for the present, at least," he amended with a smile, holding out his hand.

"Well, I am glad to hear you say so," replied Mr. Lemartine, rising also, "though, mind, I do not think I would stay in the old place alone—not just at first. I think you would be happier with a little company around you."

"I have no doubt you are right in that too. I want to do my duty, if I can. . . . Aldious, perhaps—I think I should like him to come. He wrote and offered to put off his departure to Florence, in order to stay with me at Hilmerceux instead. I told him I was going away, but I can wire and say that I've changed my mind. And I could ask one or two others, no doubt."

"That will be excellent," said the lawyer.

"Perhaps you will honor me by coming too," said Harry.

"If you care for the company of a lonely old man I will gladly come."

"It would please me if you will," said the young man

simply. "In a week, shall we say? I am staying in London till then."

"Perhaps, as you are staying in London, you will honor me by dining with me at my club to-night?" said the lawyer, with a formal air.

"Thanks very much."

When Lord Hilmerceux had left the room Mr. Lemartine sat thoughtful for awhile, thinking over what had passed with the faint smile of satisfaction of one who had conducted a difficult interview with some skill. The lawyer felt that he had accomplished a good morning's work.

CHAPTER XXV

SOLITUDE

I

October rains followed swiftly upon a dry summer, veiling the downs in flying sheets. At Hilmerceux leaves pattered on soaked lawns, and beyond the lake the trees showed yellow in autumn woods. The house bulked darkly against a landscape of streaming green.

On this night the rain held off sullenly in a brooding sky, above soddened downs streaked with gleaming pools in which the dying light mirrored the low clouds racing overhead.

The dusk was drawing in. Beneath the darkening sky a solitary seagull, white as milk, flew swiftly over Hilmerceux on its way back to the sea. As the daylight vanished the rain began to fall again with a chill spatter, and the park trees rustled in a rising wind. The rain fell heavier as a car turned in at the iron gates, and swept up the winding drive past the Place of Watch, already dark in its curtain of trees. The car swung round the bend, and up the straight slope to the house.

As he crossed the dripping terrace and sharply rang the bell, Harry thought Hilmerceux appeared more desolate than ever. This was his first visit home for months.

He was expected, and there was plenty of light and warmth within. The housekeeper was waiting in the hall to receive him, and behind her he saw Peters in the distance, a figure of dignity and respect. Mrs. Perrins bustled forward cheerfully, but seemingly a little nervous too, exclaiming in an English way about the weather, and she was afraid his lordship must have had a very cold journey down. The heir greeted her good-humoredly.

"Not very good motoring weather, Mrs. Perrins. It rained most of the time."

"Indeed, it has been dreadful weather here," she said, "nothing but storms and rain for nearly a week past. Some of the trees have been blown down in the park. I thought it might be better in London."

"No; it has been just as bad there," he said absently, glancing about the hall. "I hope everything has gone on all right at Hilmerceux while I have been away?"

"Yes, my lord; things have been much as usual, I believe. May I assure your lordship that I am very glad to see you home?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Perrins. I shall be staying at Hilmerceux for some time. I have invited a few guests for next week—three or four. To-morrow I will let you know when I expect them."

He turned to go upstairs. The housekeeper hesitated, then said:

"Mr. Radford asked me to let him know when you returned. I think he wants to see your lordship. Shall I send word to him now?"

"I will see him after dinner," said Harry, turning away.

In the center of the hall the housekeeper stood and watched him ascend the stairs. Perplexity flickered in her eyes as she looked after him: the new master of Hilmerceux, who came home so seldom and seemed like a stranger there. She thought of the past and of Lady Hilmerceux, who had died so suddenly more than a year ago after being mistress there for nearly forty years. Her own life had changed then. Hilmerceux had been lonely in the past, but it had held security, and she had understood her late mistress as she was never likely to understand the heir. What did the future hold? Her memories of the house went back to a distant date, and stories she had heard as a girl—half-forgotten sinister stories about the ways of Hilmerceux men—came back to her then at that moment. As she went to her room

she wondered again what the future was likely to have in store. She was a little afraid.

Upstairs Harry paused on the landing and looked around. The desolation and emptiness of the old house confronted him like some shadowy fantastic shape. The silence enveloped him in waves. He glanced towards the east wing before turning down to his own room. In its dim emptiness one shaded globe gleamed with a subdued and orange ray. At the far end of the corridor a narrow window was glimmeringly framed against the fading twilight.

In the Gray Room he stood for a time, deep in thought. It was melancholy listening to the rain beating like great wings against the stone walls of Hilmerceux and to hear the wind sighing across the downs. Through the partly-drawn window curtains he could see the oncoming of night, creeping closer, cheerless and black. A feeling of loneliness and unhappiness swept over him, but he resolutely fought it down. Abruptly he turned from the window to dress.

Later he descended to the great dining-room. It was certainly more cheerful there. The firelight leapt on a wide hearth; the dark walls shone ruddily, the silver and cut glass gleamed in a sparkle of light. And Peters was an admirable butler, who knew to a nicety how to add comfort and pleasure to a solitary meal. Harry dined in comfort, lingering over the courses, and drinking, perhaps, a little too much wine. If so, it must be forgiven him. Hilmerceux cellars were famous in their day, and had some irreplaceable vintages, as Peters knew. With the coffee he brought up and decanted a wonderful old port, pouring it out with reverential hand.

"This was laid down by the late lord's father," he said, probing the rich color in the decanter with a critical eye. "Ah, he was a famous judge of wine, the old lord. It would be difficult to find as fine a port as this in England to-day. Though, indeed, as your lordship knows, wine is

not much in favor now. Gentlemen drink whisky-and-soda instead."

Harry smiled, and held up his glass of port to the light.

"I fancy you think that's a pity, Peters," he said.

"Why, that's not for me to say," the butler gravely replied. "The customs of the table change with the times, no doubt, like everything else. The savoring of wines is an art, so I've heard my late master say. I doubt if any gentleman nowadays has the gift. It was an enthusiasm with him, if I may go so far. 'A good port is beyond friendship and better than a woman's love'—that was a saying of my lord's."

"Rather a cynical one," said the young man. "How long has this wine been in the cellar?"

"It was laid down sixty years ago, my lord."

"Sixty years! Why, that is a lifetime, Peters."

"Not for a wine like that, my lord."

The butler placed the decanter a little farther on the table, and withdrew. Harry sat slowly sipping his port at the polished mahogany, striving to forget the solitude which whispered around him, and the rain lashing pitilessly at the window-panes.

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Afterwards he went to the steward's room glad of the dry husk of business to pass this first evening away. He pictured other nights trooping blackly towards him which would not be so easily spent; long winter nights when he would sit alone in Hilmerceux, listening to the wind wailing on the downs, and wondering—always wondering—where Ailsa was.

The steward awaited him in his room, documents and papers spread out for inspection. He greeted Harry indifferently, as though they had parted a few hours previously, instead of months before. As they sat down to discuss the business of the estate Harry wondered more than ever why Radford stayed at Hilmerceux now. Not

for any good will he bore him—of that he felt sure.

The business wore through to its inevitable conclusion—to the moment when the heir looked up as in the past, and inquired:

“Is there anything more, Radford?”

“Nothing more, my lord.”

On his way upstairs Harry paused to look into a room. It was the library. He stood at the doorway, scanning the book-lined shelves, the curtained recesses, and the upper gallery where the brass trellis gleamed. Then he turned off the light again, and went up the wide staircase to bed.

It was difficult to sleep. He lay for a time, then arose, and went to the window. Outside the rain had ceased, and a white wisp of a moon was drifting over the downs above the flying clouds. The garden was in deep shadow, and the trees showed black beyond the lake, like ink. Under the pale light of the moon the downs slumbered in hue of a shimmering green.

He looked at these things for some time before he dropped the window curtain and went back to bed. But he lay long awake in the quietude of the house, thinking of many things. Ultimately his weariness overcame him, and thought was supplanted by weariness and sleep.

II

For a week he labored hard to atone for the default of the time he had spent since Lady Hilmerceux's death, looking for Ailsa through England. He might have spared himself this, had he wished. For everything was in perfect order; nothing had been allowed to slide. But he knew he had neglected his heritage, and for the time he wanted to work. In a sense it was a corrective for his blacker moods. If it did not bring him peace of mind, it helped to keep away vain regrets. Once more he steadied himself to take up the duty that was his; Hilmerceux, his cherish, his birthright, which he must try to

understand aright. Selfishness had prompted him to sell it, but he felt now he must be true to his trust.

But renewed zeal did not always sustain him. The blaze sometimes flickered low. It was difficult to pick up his life at Hilmerceux just where he had laid it down. Since Lady Hilmerceux's death and Ailsa's departure things were in some subtle way changed. The house seemed hostile to him, and the downs more lonely than before. At first there were times when he wanted to rush off again, but some unsuspected quality within him helped him to overcome the feeling and to conquer his weakness again.

He filled his days with estate affairs; but the nights he spent alone. The days supported the isolation of the nights, but not because they were spent with Radford. The words which passed between the two men were few. But if they spoke little, they went about the management of the estate in apparent accord. Whatever their inmost thoughts, they kept them to themselves. There were occasions when Harry even asked himself if he had not been too hasty in his judgment of this man. For Radford was as unwearied in his service as he had been in that of the dead mistress whom he had served for twenty years. Was it—could it be—that he sought to atone? To atone for what, if he felt himself justified according to his lights? But such speculations were idle, and of no avail. No one could guess what went on in Radford's mind. Perhaps his service was mere loyalty to a name.

Nevertheless, Harry gradually came to believe that the steward had changed, in the same inexplicable way that the house had changed.

It was difficult exactly to define where the difference lay. It was very slight at most. Still, it was there: an occasional glance or gesture, a hint of indecision, where before there had been nothing but strength. Harry wondered if the death of Lady Hilmerceux had been a tragedy to Radford, affecting him more deeply than might have been supposed. An iron exterior might not mean

an iron heart, and the steward of Hilmerceux had lived side by side with his late mistress for a space of twenty years. Harry remembered how much she had thought of Radford. Perhaps he, on his part, after serving her with devotion for so long, mourned her with far deeper grief than might have been supposed. He had a feeling of pity for Radford if this were so, in spite of the injury which he had, as he believed, wreaked on him. For a too rigid conception of duty might have prompted his spying and tale-bearing there. In the moral balance of values here the heir knew that his own conduct had not been free from blame. He still felt bitter towards Radford, but he reproached himself as well. It was that feeling which withheld his promised retribution from the steward now that Ailsa had gone. To send Radford away was not to bring her back. And the steward, he supposed, had merely been actuated by his zeal for the welfare of the house.

So the days passed until the time came for the visit of Dick Aldious. Harry met him at Worthing, the nearest station to Hilmerceux. Cordial greetings were exchanged as they waited for the porter. And then they made for the waiting car, the porter with the luggage following in the rear. Hilmerceux was a drive of six miles, one mile through the town, the remainder through the countryside. Swiftly the car glided along empty roads between watery downs until the iron gates of Hilmerceux came into view.

At dinner that night, in the presence of the servants, Dick Aldious had little to say. But afterwards, down in the billiard-room the conversation took a more intimate turn. During a pause in the game Harry looked at his guest.

"It was awfully decent of you to come to enliven my loneliness here," he said a trifle awkwardly.

"Not at all. I was pleased when you wired, in fact," Dick responded. "Do you know, I am very glad to see you here again."

The other nodded, as though he understood.

"Perhaps you may be able to accompany me abroad

in the New Year," Dick said. "Hilmerceux is a big place for one. You must find it lonely sometimes."

"Why, yes," said Harry, then added frankly, "though I've hardly seen enough of it for that. But of course I've got to get over not wanting to live here. It is my home, and I must settle down."

Dick Aldious thought he looked very young as he said this, standing by the billiard table with his eyes fixed on the pictures that lined the walls. There was a note of appeal in his voice, as though he needed help.

"Lemartine comes down to-morrow," said Harry.

With that remark they returned to the interrupted game.

CHAPTER XXVI

CHANCE

I

The guests had stayed their time and gone. A cheerless autumn deepened into a bleak December, which came in cold and wet. Life at Hilmerceux became for its owner a thing more difficult than before. The days grew dark and short, with much rain. There were odd intervals of frost, when the lawns glittered and the house was steeped in the sharpened silver of a December sun, but always the rain followed swiftly, and the downs steamed and smoked in sluggish mist. Though at night, when the wind stirred on Chanctonbury, they grew dark and clear again.

By sheer will Harry kept to his duty; but it was not always easy. There were days when it rained without ceasing, and the future seemed of small consequence beside a dismal present; there were other days when there seemed nothing to do except roam uneasily on the downs and come home to a solitary house. Then there was only dinner to look forward to, though that meal did something to atone for the emptiness of the day. Outside the wind might whisper round the lonely house, and the downs look dead and black, but inside was warmth and light—and champagne. Port—even port mellowed by sixty years in Hilmerceux cellars, and declared by a Hilmerceux to be better than woman's love, was, after all, a drink for old age. Its very mellowness attested that. But champagne flowed with the effervescence of youth, and gave bright dreams. With its help the evenings slipped more quickly away. For what else was there to do? He could not play billiards alone, and he was restlessly disinclined to read. So he lingered over his wine, a handsome slim figure in

his dress-clothes in the great dining-room, sipping and thinking, but always conscious of the empty house soaring overhead. In these moods he was glad when the long evenings had vanished and bedtime was at hand. Then—a little unsteadily, perhaps—he would make his way upstairs to the Gray Room, and to bed.

At times when it grew late he would wander along the dim corridors with a silver candlestick in his hand, looking into the empty rooms. Sheeted and silent and dark, they reminded him of dead apartments in their shrouds. And thus he would go from room to room, until he came to the picture gallery. Swiftly he would walk down it till he reached his grandfather's portrait. Before it he would stand motionless, holding an unsteady candlestick so that its light fell upon the face in the frame. The picture would hold his vision for long minutes of time. In the darkness of that somber gallery the two pairs of eyes—the painted and the living—would look at one another until the living eyes would droop. Then he would turn away hurriedly, and go with stumbling footsteps from the empty gallery to his bedroom.

For it was at such moments that he knew himself as a true Hilmerceux: one of that dark passionate turbulent breed, akin with his ancestors in spirit as well as blood. It was as though his grandfather's lips whispered evil things to him then, when the wine had turned to fire in his veins. In that strange communion of the night, the passion of the flesh was the bond between them. The thoughts which had once surged through the grandfather's mind were, for the moment, his thoughts too.

In the morning when he awoke, rested and calm, and in another frame of mind, he would feel shame for his overnight lapse and the thoughts which had run riot in his brain. He was no milksop, but he was sanely conscious that such images were better kept away. Perhaps, in this feeling of shame, his hope for the future lay, for its foundations went as deep as his heritage of blood. His

shame was the outcome of his love for Ailsa, which burnt within his heart like some purifying and mystic flame.

After all, he was not yet twenty-four. Behind him lay the wreckage of a brief dream of happiness, and what lay before him he neither knew nor cared. In his blood ran the impulses of a long line of voluptuaries, which, in the long run, might carry him away. But that was by no means sure. At present his love for Ailsa ran deeper than he knew: the light before her shrine burnt undimmed in his breast. It may be subconsciously he realized that through her the way to his salvation lay. He held fast to her image in the winter darkness of Hilmerceux, when evil thoughts dogged him like shadows in the silence of the old house.

He thought of her constantly, though already she seemed remote and distant from him, like a figure in a dream.

II

His most vivid memory went back to that summer's day on the downs, when her hair gleamed dark gold in the dusky setting of the wood and her eyes were uplifted to his. Another poignant remembrance was of her standing in the doorway of her room, looking after him as she said good night. That was the night before Lady Hilmerceux's death; a week before she herself had gone away, leaving Hilmerceux without a word, without a sign. That was more than a year ago, but the desire to find her was with him more than ever now, haunting his days and the long, solitary nights.

There were times in the dusk when he seemed to see her looking down at him from the head of the wide stairs or to catch a glimpse of her figure vanishing into the library. Once, indeed, he awakened in the night and thought he heard the sound of her voice, raised as if in fear, echoing from the stillness of the east wing. So vivid was the impression that he went and looked, though he knew only too well that she was not there. He knew these things

were fancy: tricks played by imagination on a solitary dweller in a great house, where every nook and corner breathed the spirit of departed life.

Living in solitude there, he spent much time in wondering where she was. His mind would go back to the early days of her disappearance, when he first began to realize that she did not mean to return. The impulse of his temperament had spurred him to rush off in search of her without a moment's delay, but some inherited instinct had bid him play the more seemly part. Firmly he told himself that he must give nothing to the scandal-mongers while the body of his grandaunt lay in the house. That much he owed her, at least. So he remained at Hilmerceux until the funeral had taken place, and longer; staying there through the halting days until the creaking mechanism of the law and inheritance had gone their tedious way, and he was his own master at last.

When these things were accomplished he felt free to look for Ailsa. Some feeling which was almost a conviction told him that a country girl like her would not go to London or very far away. With that faint instinct to guide him he set out like a crusader to find her: a crusader in a motor-car. Through the South of England he searched for her assiduously, but in vain. Months went by without a trace, or a sign.

Where love failed to penetrate the mystery of her retreat, the law failed as well. Up in London Mr. Lemartine took other measures to find her, equally barren of result.

At the end of his long search Harry went to London, and saw Mr. Lemartine. Inevitably at that time his feeling was one of despair—too much so, the lawyer thought. But then Harry loved Ailsa, and Mr. Lemartine did not. Back at Hilmerceux, the torture of her absence did not grow less. It was increased by the conjectures he formed of the reason for her flight. She had gone because Lady Hilmerceux had said something to her, after that interview in the picture gallery with him on the night before her death. Had the dead woman made the same unhappy

revelation to the girl? That he could not guess, but he thought not. It was more probable that she sought to play upon the capacity for self-sacrifice in Ailsa's heart. Of one thing he was certain: whatever passed between them on that fateful night would be considered doubly binding by Ailsa after Lady Hilmerceux's tragic death. Yes; he felt sure of that; and Ailsa had gone away.

Doubtless it had seemed to her that her path was clear: made imperative, as it were, by this tragic, unlooked-for event. What other reason but sacrifice could there be? She had told him that she loved him, and with that gentle avowal on her lips she had departed without a word.

Mr. Lemartine had an additional reason for finding Ailsa because of a small legacy bequeathed to her under Lady Hilmerceux's will.

There were times when Harry felt that she was near him. But there was scant comfort in that thought.

III

It wanted two weeks to Christmas, and the weather remained dull and wet. Harry stayed on at Hilmerceux alone. Aldious had pressed him to join him abroad in the New Year, but he had excused himself. Florence offered no refuge from his thoughts, so he preferred to remain at Hilmerceux. But there were times when the haunting pressure of empty rooms was too much for him. Hilmerceux began to assume to his fancy an air of covert watchfulness, like a house listening for something which it alone could detect. At such moments he began to feel for his birthright an undefined loathing and dread. He imagined it possessed of a hidden consciousness of its own: a secret sluggish existence inimical to him.

Instinctively he realized that such morbid fancies and disturbing thoughts were best cured by open air. So instead of remaining indoors after dinner he passed the hours until bedtime motoring through the countryside in his powerful car. Nightly he sped forth, racing over

the high downs and along lonely roads, or threading a gleaming way along the coast through the seaside towns scattered along the brink of the Channel.

IV

It was four days before Christmas. He had motored thirty miles that afternoon, reaching Eastbourne after dark and dining at one of the hotels on the front. After dinner he had gone out to smoke a cigar on the deserted promenade and had wandered aimlessly along the water's edge until confronted by the pretentious bluff of a giant cliff looming against the wintry sky.

Beyond the Head and the line of cliffs the lights of Brighton glittered in the distance. At some more remote point to the left a warning beacon flashed a finger of gold into the haze. In the white brilliance of an arc-light the yellow waves chafed fretfully, like water anxious to escape from the shallow confines of the Channel to some mightier sea.

In this scene he stood smoking, with no thought for these things, or the pair of lovers outlined like clinging phantoms at the edge of the luminous foam.

He walked slowly along near a beach shelter, looming bleakly in the arc-light. Passing it, he did not notice the solitary figure of a girl sitting in the dark recess, watching the sea. He went on until he came to an unoccupied seat a little farther away. Here he sat down.

For some time he stayed there, musing; seeking, as he had so often sought before, a clue of the meaning of Ailsa's flight. Why had she not told him? There were deeps in this mystery he would never know, unless he found her again, but whatever the unknown explanation was he believed that Ailsa and he had been sacrificed for the shadow of a baseless fear. Lady Hilmerceux's words came faintly to him from the past—from the grave—tor-turing him afresh. "They cannot be true," he told himself. Folly—monstrous folly—to suppose that the living

must pay for the sins of the past, or were held in sinister bonds by the iniquity of the dead. Dreadful and incredible doctrine! The living carried burdens enough, without shouldering dead generations' sins. "I will not believe it," he thought again. The dead went to their graves and took their sins with them. They were not permitted to rise and torture the living. The past was their heritage; the living had the future for their own. Was the past to destroy the love and happiness of Ailsa and himself?

He rose from the seat with a sudden renewed determination not to allow it to do so. He told himself he must find Ailsa if the search lasted all his life. Somewhere in England she was that night, and perhaps not very far away. Why had he given up looking for her? If he had kept on instead of returning to Hilmerceux she might have been found.

For a few moments longer he stood beneath the arc-light, looking down at the tossing water, as though his fancy beheld her coming with outstretched arms towards him across the faint silver gleam of the sea. Then he turned to walk back along the rain-swept and deserted front in the direction of the hotel. Had he been less occupied with his own thoughts he might have observed the pale face of a girl who was crouched back in a dark corner of the shelter watching him as he passed beneath the light. But his glance was directed to the wet footpath beneath his feet as he walked along, concerned only with the plans of his new search.

CHAPTER XXVII

AILSA ALONE

I

From the shelter Ailsa had watched him as he sat moodily staring out at the sea. When he rose to go her hands went out to him instinctively, and if he had looked around just then she would have gone to him without a word. But he walked straight on, glancing neither to the right nor left. She shrank back into her seat as he hurried past; so close that his face showed in clear outline beneath the brilliance of the arc-light. Her heart smote her at his pale and troubled face, and the vague recklessness of his air. In agony her eyes followed him along the rain-swept front to the hotel and a waiting car. Then his voice, clear and distinct, reached her ears:

“Let us get home, Willis.”

She heard the chauffeur start the car. The next moment it was gone, sweeping along the curve of the front until out of sight. She did not move. Her head drooped a little, she sat staring straight before her. But she no longer saw the sea, or the spot where the arc-light shone like a silver fan upon the surface of the water. It was the black outline of Hilmerceux in a lonely setting of autumn downs which seemed to rise before her on the surface of the sea. Eastbourne and its front slipped from her. Her thoughts were of the past at Hilmerceux, and the morning when she left it at early dawn.

II

Her promise to Lady Hilmerceux after the revelation of her grandmother's hidden love story had sent her away.

She had been ready to give her promise for the sake of the man she loved; though the revelation of her grandmother's secret reason for going to Lady Hilmerceux on her behalf had had its effect in rousing her pride. After Lady Hilmerceux died she had carried out her compact. Because she mistrusted her courage she left Hilmerceux without a word. It was the only way. She knew if she had told Harry he would not have let her go. And if he—knowing all—had taken her in his arms, she would have stayed. But a promise to the dead must be kept. So, she had kept it, by slipping away from him in secret, in the ashen silence of the dawn, despair in her heart. . . .

How it all came back to her! Though, indeed, it had never been out of her mind. Her arrangements had been methodically made. In the darkness she had gone noiselessly downstairs, and let herself out through a French window. Outside she paused to listen, but the house was still asleep. Dawn was just beginning to break on the downs as she crossed the bridge over the lake into the silence and shadow of the park. When she passed the trees the way lay before her to the higher downs. From their heights she looked back at Hilmerceux in the first rays of the sun. Its gray walls were touched with gold, and the lake sparkled brightly in the shadow of the trees. With misty eyes she turned away.

Before her the downs stretched in green emptiness. She walked on for an hour or more until she came to an old finger-post with one decrepit arm pointing downward to the turf, as if to indicate the ultimate destination all wayfarers must reach. A generation before it had marked a bridle path to Lorington, which was now rarely used. Standing beside the weather-beaten post, Ailsa surveyed her choice of routes. The unused grassy path fell steeply to Lorington, six miles away. From the market town she could reach Horsham by omnibus, and so on to London, if she desired to go there. On the right of the ancient post the downs lay beneath a blue sky. To the left they sloped downward to Amberley and Arundel, and the coast-

line towns and villages bounded by Littlehampton-on-Sea.

She decided for Lorington—in the first place; and went quickly on her way.

III

It was in a small town not far from Horsham that she found a friend and a livelihood too. Chance led her to Bramsley. She had no settled plans to guide her, though her country instinct led her to avoid large towns. The little money she had was sufficient to keep her until she found something to do. And in Bramsley that problem solved itself for her.

In the pretty and quaint little town on the north slope of the South Downs she stood and pondered her next step. Looking down at the rambling street of antique houses of wood and stone, she wondered whether she might find some employment there. The small town, encompassed by towering green downs, had an air of restfulness and isolation which appealed to Ailsa very much. As she walked along the quiet street that pleasant afternoon she felt that such a place might hold peace for her. And then, breaking into her abstraction, a loud and astonished voice had come to her—"Why, Ailsa Rose!"

She turned with a start, and saw a tall, dark girl, who had crossed the twisted, narrow street to speak to her, and was now almost at her side. She knew her for an old schoolmate at Worthing some years before. Hilda Garnham was older than Ailsa, but she had been fond of her, and when she went away to London for the higher education which was to bring a scholastic career within her reach she had promised to write regularly to the young girl. After they parted she had written once or twice, and then Ailsa heard from her no more. Ailsa understood that Hilda was to finish her education abroad, and she supposed she had forgotten her then.

But Hilda was as glad to see her again as if they had been dear friends ever since. The chance meeting touched

some emotional chord within her. She beamed at the younger girl through her glasses, and carried her off to tea at her lodgings. She lived with a widow in a pretty gabled cottage which looked out on the Adur, at the foot of the town. Here the two girls had a long talk, exchanging experiences of life since their school days. The years that lay between had made Hilda principal of a small girls' school in the little town, to which she had come from Hampshire, three years before. In Bramsley her life had been quiet and colorless enough. And Ailsa told her of her own life, though little of Hilmerceux, and of its heir nothing at all.

This chance meeting was of significance to both. Hilda was full of sympathy when she heard that Ailsa was now alone in the world. She invited the girl to stay with her for the week-end. Ailsa thankfully accepted the offer, glad of the respite and the companionship of this forgotten friend. And before the week-end was over, Hilda had a proposal to make. She asked Ailsa to stay on and help her with the small pupils of her little school. Its growth justified some modest assistance, it seemed, and she would much prefer Ailsa to a stranger. As they were both alone in the world it would be very nice for them to be together, Hilda thought. Ailsa was deeply grateful, but murmured that she did not know enough to teach in a school. Hilda was scornfully reassuring—"Nonsense. Ailsa! It's not teaching—actually. It's only a kindergarten. You can help me with the music lessons and other things. Of course I cannot pay you much, but we can live together and share these rooms. And as for being grateful—why, I shall be grateful to you. This is a very dull town."

She finished with a laugh and a kiss. Ailsa sighed; then thanked her simply. And so it was arranged.

With Hilda she had lived since then, helping in the unpretentious school. To the girl time had brought calm and a measure of peace. If it had not brought happiness as well, it had at least soothed her more poignant regrets. The remote town on its unfamiliar downs was a haven of

peace, and her duties at the school helped to keep her cheerful and brave. She thought of Harry often, but fought against the desire to go to him. She had her struggles, but little by little she conquered. The desperate misery in her heart grew less. If, sometimes, on the solitude of the downs, she thought sadly of the forgotten past, she was too sensible a girl to brood overmuch.

In the first days of her unhappiness she had sent him a short letter, telling him she was well, and bidding him good-by. She had not told him where she was, but she wondered as she posted the letter if the postmark might be seen. Doubtless she had been weak there; but he had been strong. At least he had not tried to find her. Perhaps already he had forgotten her. On that tragic night Lady Hilmerceux had told her Hilmerceux men were never faithful for long. Though that had not weighed with her at all. She loved him, and if he had wanted her she would not have counted the cost. For his sake she would have stayed. For his sake she had gone away.

The mere passage of time without tortured feelings had lulled her into the belief that she had found lasting peace from the storms of existence and love. She was young enough to mistake the false tranquillity of a sheltered life for the resignation which age alone can reach.

She and Hilda Garnham had come to Eastbourne to spend their Christmas holidays quietly together there. That night Hilda was dining with friends, and in her absence Ailsa had gone out after dinner for a solitary walk on the front.

IV

And now?

As the car vanished from her view into the darkness of the night, she stood staring after it with all her former love for him surging maddeningly in her heart. Straining her eyes in the direction the car had taken, she lived that

brief moment of unsuspected encounter over and over again. In some way he was different; looking haggard and older—almost ill. Not happy . . . no; he did not look happy at all. So she told herself, once more passing that brief glimpse in anxious review. Did that mean he remembered her, and wanted her still? Her heart beat wildly at the thought, then reproached her for thinking so. "I do not want him to be unhappy," she whispered to herself. "I left him for his happiness." Had not Lady Hilmerceux assured her that was the best thing she could do: to go away, and never see him again?

Dare she break the promise she had made with one who was now in her grave?

In somber perplexity she considered this point. Far away she seemed to see him in his car, racing back to Hilmerceux, sweeping along the lonely white road which ran upward through familiar downs. In imagination she followed it through the great iron gates, and saw Hilmerceux rising in dark outline against its background of downs and sky. If she had only been there, watching for him from a window, and then running out to meet him. She had a vision of him later in the empty lonely house, in his room, perhaps thinking of her.

All her love urged her to return to Hilmerceux, but the memory of her last words to Lady Hilmerceux relentlessly barred the way. "You promised you would not see him again, . . . you promised . . . promised . . . promised." The waves, breaking upon the sand at her feet, seemed to be uttering these words in mocking repetition.

True; she had promised, solemnly, faithfully. . . .

Ah, what did she care for promises, after she had seen the suffering in his eyes? If he wanted her still she would go to him, no matter how many promises she had made! His eyes told her he had not found happiness, whatever the cause. Her love had made this great surrender, which seemed to have been of no avail. What should she do now?

Her resolution was quickly made. She determined that she would see him once more. That course meant treachery to the dead, but a promise unfairly exacted was not one to be kept. And, if her apostasy brought punishment, the burden of wrong-doing was hers. She would have committed worse sins for his sake. If he still needed her, she must go.

"And if he has forgotten you by now?" the voice of common sense whispered in her ear.

"In that case," she told herself, half-aloud, "I can go away again, if it is for his happiness."

With her hands clasped tightly together, her eyes looking out on the sea, she formed her plans. She was not by nature emotional, save when her love swept her away. Prudence steadied her now. She knew it would be unwise to go to Hilmerceux, and ask for him. That course meant awkward questions, whisperings, the primly-veiled glances of servants' curious eyes. She did not care for herself; but for his sake she must not do anything which would give people room to talk. Afterwards, she would be ready enough to brave the world's opinion if he still loved her. Afterwards! She paused in her thoughts there. That was for him to say.

In the end she decided to write and ask him to meet her on the downs, by the dewpond in the midst of the heather. Assuming that he still loved her, he would come to her there. She would make the appointment for two days later, when Hilda was visiting friends at Bexhill, and she would have the day to herself. That would also give her letter time to reach Hilmerceux. She would take an early train to Brighton, and make the remainder of the journey by bus. After seeing him she could return to Eastbourne by an evening train, unless, indeed. . . . But she tried to avoid thinking of what that meeting might mean; enough for her just then was the intolerable longing of her heart to see him again.

She walked quickly back to the boarding house off the

front. In the privacy of the room she and Hilda shared together she sat down and wrote a letter that caused her much anxious thought, though it contained but two or three lines. Then, hatless, she ran out and dropped it in the pillar-box by the pier.

With tears in her eyes she slowly retraced her steps to the house.

CHAPTER XXVIII

RETURNED

I

Two days later, Ailsa's heart beat more rapidly than usual when the omnibus from Brighton drew up at the Worthing front. She stepped out and looked about her. How familiar it all seemed: the pier, the Dome, the hotels, and the waiting buses drawn up by the untidy promenade. The prospect of the journey had excited her, but now that so much was accomplished she felt nervous and a little depressed. Before, she had wanted to get there so quickly, but now——

She entered another bus, which was about to leave, and looked out of the window as it went through the town. Familiar landmarks slipped past her one by one, as she sat there deep in thought. The town merged into fields and hedgerows and country roads: now it seemed like home-coming indeed. The omnibus stopped at a way-side hamlet, and Ailsa got off. She meant to walk across the downs by Cissbury to her meeting place.

Her way lay along a country road, then through an open gate across a field to a rutted lane which ran beside the golf links and climbed from them to the downs. Past the links the lane grew steeper, contracting to a footway between overhanging trees, and finally dwindling to a narrow bridle-path which twisted around the lower slope of Cissbury like a thread.

Ailsa walked leisurely on until she reached Cissbury. Here she paused, looking around. Below the massive earthworks of the great hill the coastline and surrounding country-side lay unrolled: civilization on one side, on the other the downs. Cissbury, with its high circular earthworks and double trench, unchanged since its hill-fortress

days, when Celtic Britons fought on its slopes. Ailsa pictured skin-clad shaggy fighters on the ramparts hurling down great stones on creeping foes below.

Looking inland from the summit, the downs appeared but little changed since the days when the second king of the Saxons, fighting his way through Sussex, had fortified the hill and called it Cissa's burgh. From where Ailsa stood the great green cup dropped in a bold curve to a valley; to rise gradually upwards again to the distant dark crest of Chanctonbury. Between, the downs undulated in round-topped hill and valley, with occasional clumps of trees; and patches of heather growing here and there.

So it was that, while on one side of this primeval outpost modernity and civilization struggled and encroached, on the other there was nothing to destroy the illusion of antiquity: only the magnificent solitude of the downs; with scattered sheep, and a few mountain cattle seeking pasturage in the hills.

From where she stood Ailsa looked down on this panorama in softly-colored tones, unspoilt and beautiful as a thousand years ago. Her eyes saw each familiar point in a scene she had known since childhood: a leafless wood showing black against a hill, the winding road white and sunken in the green, and a hamlet or two on the farther downs. As she looked she heard the distant tinkle of a sheep-bell.

With a final glance around she went on, quickening her pace downhill, for she had still some distance to go. The path took her across the earthworks to the right, and then over Cissbury's shoulder into the great green valley and the silent environment of the downs. The way grew more remote and wild as she hurried along: rising again before slanting over into the rim of a smaller cup, clothed with heather and encircled by hills. Here the sloping path became stony, and fell more sharply away. At the bottom of it was the dewpond where she had arranged to meet the man she loved.

II

In summer the spot was pleasant, but it was different now. The water gleamed coldly in the heather; a bitter black pool, with sopping weeds at the edge. By its side was an old thorn-tree, gray and dead. It was a solitary and secret fold of the downs, from which nothing could be seen but the sky.

The air was damp and chill, but Ailsa was well wrapped up. She stood by the thorn-tree, her sweet face lifted upward to scan the top of the little ridge down which Harry must come. By her wrist-watch she saw that she was there a little before her appointed time, which she had fixed for two o'clock. Some minutes passed. Her tension increased. Mechanically her lips whispered words of greeting as she rehearsed what she would say. Then she looked restlessly around her. How often had she pictured this place in her thoughts, and the day they had seen it together! Now she stood there alone, waiting for him. It was almost two o'clock. Why was he not there?

She turned from the pond and mounted the ridge. From the top she looked over the wintry downs. Against the skyline she saw a gaunt and stooping figure with a staff, bearing a bag strapped to the shoulders. The figure vanished over the top of a hill.

Her eyes swept the empty downs a little mistily now, but she would not listen to the first faint doubts of her heart. He was coming; oh, yes, he would come. "He may just be late," she said to herself. She had a sudden vision of him, eager, handsome; of feeling her hands in his. . . . But there was no one in sight.

The loneliness of the downs became unbearable. She turned sadly back again to the pond, sensible only of a bitter disappointment that he was not there. She paused for a moment, looking at the water. A robin fluttered from the thorn-tree to her feet, glancing up at her with bright indifferent eyes. The time was a quarter-past two.

The last ten minutes had gone very fast. A single sob shook her, but still she refused to despair, or to look the inevitable in the face. Wearily she strove to think of reasons which might keep him, though her heart told her that he would have been there at the appointed hour if his feelings had not changed.

For as long as possible she resolutely kept her eyes from wandering downward to the watch at her wrist. Unconsciously they strayed there now. The longer hand had reached the red figure of six on the tiny dial. Half-past two.

"I will wait just a little while longer," she whispered to herself, with quivering lips. But there was heartbreak in her faint effort to smile.

She went up the ridge again, despair creeping near; her girlish grace drooped. He was not in sight. Beyond the ridge there was nothing: only the downs and the sky. Why had she come?

Nevertheless, she waited still. Time, which had seemed long on the journey from Eastbourne, now raced round with speed. Three o'clock! It grew dark at four, in December, on the downs.

A quarter past three. . . .

Her dreams departed. The thought to comfort him, to make him happy again. . . . That was over now. He had not wanted her, after all. Her gift of love—of herself—had been rejected; and she was shamed. Listlessness and weariness brooded over her as she stood there with trembling lips, clasping and unclasping her hands. The desolation of her thoughts was hard to bear just then, for until that moment she had not known how eagerly she had longed for him to come. But he had failed her, and she would never see him again. That was over too.

With one final look into the distance she moved away from the ridge in the direction she had come.

As she walked quickly on, for the first time she noticed the unusual aspect of the sky. The day had been clammy and mild for the season of the year, of a not unusual

December type for the south of England. But, looking upward, Ailsa saw that the sky was closer to the downs than she had ever known: a shadowy inverted saucer of gray, which seemed very near. The sight of clouds on Chanctonbury was one she had frequently seen, but great banks of clouds sailing low over the whole surface of the downs was a remarkable and solemn phenomenon. Glancing ahead, she saw that Cissbury had almost vanished, swathed in white. That was very strange too.

The air grew colder. Ailsa shivered a little, and walked on faster, her eyes still fixed on the lowering cloud-banks above her head. As she watched them they assumed strange shapes. A moment later, to her great surprise, some wisps of white mist rose from nowhere and floated before her. She stayed her steps to look at them; but as she did so they disappeared. She went on, then they appeared again—this time nearer than before: faint, misty spirals stealing towards her like ghosts summoned to a secret meeting-place on the downs.

At first these spirals floated lightly up into the still sky, leaving the downs as before. And yet not quite. Gradually Ailsa became aware of a faint grayness in the air, as if her eyesight had gone dim. The next moment a stranger thing happened. In a dip of the downs below she had observed a number of seagulls and rooks; crossing and flying round and round in a kind of black and white minuet. All at once birds and hollow vanished as she looked. A mist was drawn across the valley like a sheet.

And then Ailsa understood. A fog was settling on the downs.

She watched the haze blot out the valleys singly and then roll sluggishly up towards the heights. The spectacle was startling, and one which Ailsa had never beheld before. It was as though the downs were afire, and wrapped in writhing masses of smoke. The familiar green landscape began to dissolve and fade from view. Cissbury disappeared, and with it the lower downs and the distant strip of the Channel. Chanctonbury's dark crest showed for

awhile in the distance, then it was erased also. Like a noiseless tide the fog flowed on, obliterating the downs in a cold whiteness which blotted out the sky as well. It reached and surrounded her, shutting out all things from sight.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES

I

In the silence that lay upon Hilmerceux, Harry looked from one of the windows of the great hall. The fog on the downs had grown thicker; it pressed white against the window-pane. To-night there could be no going out. That at least was certain; yet every tick of the clock behind him intensified his impatience at the prospect of the long empty evening indoors.

A door opened and a footstep sounded; lights gleamed in the hall. He turned from the window and looked round. It was the housekeeper. Seeing him, she gave a slight start.

"I beg your lordship's pardon," she said, "I was not aware that you were here."

"A heavy fog, Mrs. Perrins!"

"Yes, indeed, my lord, so close and thick, that it's difficult to breathe. And there's no keeping it out. It will be all through the house if it doesn't clear away. It is going upstairs now."

He followed the direction of her glance to where some white filaments of mist were floating up the broad stairs.

"Well," he said, smiling a little, "I don't suppose it will do any harm."

She shut the window at which he had been standing, drew the curtains close, and hurried away. Harry went upstairs to dress. There was no fog in the dining-room when he went down half an hour later, but the lights shone as though encircled by haloes, and the butler coughed apologetically once or twice behind his hand during the course of the meal. Harry turned to him.

"Does the fog show any signs of lifting, Peter?"

"Why, no, my lord," was the reply. "It seems thicker than ever outside."

The young man finished dining and went to the library, where he sought to interest himself with a book. But in the comfort and luxury of the great book-lined room he felt more restless than ever, and his mind soon drifted from the contents of the volume in his hand.

The muffling blanket of fog that covered the downs affected his nerves in some subtle, indefinable way. Through the drawn window curtains at the far end of the library he could catch a glimpse of it shrouded against the window outside. And the house was enwrapped in a kind of curious breathless quiet, which made him feel as though he were sunk fathoms deep in some mysterious ghostly sea.

A tap at the door aroused him. "Come in!" he said. The housekeeper entered, with a worried face.

"I beg your lordship's pardon for disturbing you, but I've been over the house myself to see if all the windows are shut. I cannot think where the fog is coming in. May I look at this window, my lord?"

Crossing the room she did so, while Harry stood by the fireplace and watched her.

"I'd be sorry for any poor soul out on the downs to-night," she said as she turned from the window. "I've never seen a fog like this—except once. It reminds me of the great fog in the downs forty years ago."

He looked at her quickly.

"You remember that, Mrs. Perrins?"

"Oh, yes, my lord, I remember it well. It was a terrible night: a thick fog just like this, and it set in about the same time. I shall never forget it as long as I live. It was so bad that the late vicar went to the church and tolled the bell himself for hours, in case anyone was lost on the downs. And very lonesome and mournful the bell sounded at Hilmerceux, to be sure,

coming across the foggy downs like the toll of a passing bell. What's more, it would have done no good to a person wandering in the downs, for you couldn't tell in the least where the sound was coming from."

Her listener nodded understandingly. He knew something of the phantom sound of bells in foggy seas.

"What happened?" he asked. "Did the fog last long?"

"Till nearly morning, my lord. Then the winds sprang up, racing and shrieking across the downs, as though it meant to tear up Hilmerceux and carry it away. I was awakened by the windows rattling, like guns going off. I got up from my bed just in time to see the fog lifting, with great black rents right through it where the wind was rushing about. It was really a very strange sight, and gave me quite a turn."

"I've no doubt it did," said Harry.

"This fog looks like lasting as long," continued the housekeeper in the same low hurried voice, like a woman who feared being overheard. "One doesn't look for such things on the downs. A little mist in a mild December is what we might expect, but not a great fog like this."

A sensation of floating mist made her cough. Some fog had penetrated into the library while she had been speaking, and hovered about her fresh and dimpled face, partly obscuring it from view. Through it she regarded him with anxious eyes.

"I declare it is coming in here," she said nervously. "I don't know what to do."

He gave her a kindly smile.

"Don't worry about it," he counselled. "Forget it and go to bed. In the morning it will be gone."

"No doubt your lordship is right," she replied. "I do hope a big storm will spring up in the night and blow it away. It is most disturbing. Good night, my lord."

When she had gone the young man settled back in his

easy chair before the glowing logs, with the feeling that it was good to be indoors. The housekeeper's story reminded him of another account of that previous fog: "a visitation of A'mighty God, and a most dismal sight to see." His memory went back to that bright day when Ailsa had taken him over the downs to Tullington. Again he seemed to see the sunshine, the sheep dotting the high green hill, and the old shepherd with his long floating cloak hobbling down the slope. With a sigh he picked up his book.

Time went on as he sat there by the fire, sometimes reading, but more often staring into the leaping flames. It began to grow late. Then, in the silence of the house beneath, he thought he heard the sound of a laugh.

He sprang up, his senses fully alert. Was it possible he had been mistaken. Yet no! It had reached him, that single hoarse note; a laugh not of merriment, but something uncanny and disquieting, with a sinister suggestion of wildness in its sound. Who laughed thus at Hilmerceux, at that hour?

Walking to the door he opened it quietly, and listened. For a moment the silence remained unbroken—profound and complete—throughout the house. Then a low muttering welled up to him, continuous and indistinct, interspersed now and again by a sharper and more strident note. It came from the gloom below stairs in rapid utterance, an unceasing incoherent monologue which touched the blood of the listener with fear, though he could not have said why. He knew it for the voice of Radford, talking in the darkness underneath. Curiosity struggled with disquiet as he listened. What should it mean? With whom was the silent steward talking so excitedly at that late hour in his room?

He lingered another moment, listening; and then stole softly down the few stairs which led to the corridor beneath. As he hurried along it the rapid muttering floated through the darkness to his ears like the fantastic relation of some interminable unending tale. It flowed

on and on, even when he stood before the door of the steward's room. Without waiting to knock he turned the handle and opened the door.

The room was lighted, but thick with fog. At the far end the long window was open, and Radford was standing there, staring out into the fog. As the door opened he turned round quickly and gazed at the intruder with an evil look. There was a strange, grim light in his eyes as he came forward a step or two and waited for the other to speak.

Harry walked past him across the room to close the window, shutting out the fog. Then he turned, relieved and amazed to find the steward alone.

"Radford," he said sternly, "what has been happening down here to-night? I heard you from above stairs, laughing and talking to yourself. Is there anything wrong?"

The steward fixed a deep unwavering gaze upon him, and was silent for a moment, like a man trying to work out these questions in his mind. Then he strode again to the window, and pointed to the shrouding fog.

"The fog!" he cried. "Do you see it?"

"Of course I do," said the young man in surprise. "What of it?"

The steward gazed out of the window as if he found it impossible to tear his eyes from the sight.

"What of it?" he repeated fiercely. "It means God's anger with this house has been aroused at last. God's measure of wrath is full, and this night you shall drink it to the dregs. Forty years ago, ay, almost to the day, there was a fog like this one to-night."

His face became convulsed as he uttered these words, then went so white that Harry grew alarmed for him.

"Come, Radford," he said authoritatively, "calm yourself. You are talking rather wildly, you know. Surely you have not lost your head over a fog? You have upset Mrs. Perrins by leaving your window open and letting the fog into the house. I am surprised at you, man! You

had better leave that window shut, and go to bed. Or at least you might try to keep quiet."

The steward cast on him a baleful glance.

"Quiet!" He repeated the word with a kind of cry. "Who can be quiet this night? I tell you the wrath of God is abroad. This fog is the testimony—sent by the living God as a sign! To-night this lustful wicked house shall wither under His curse. Come from the four winds, O breath! The dry bones harken to Him . . . and live."

He gave utterance to this outburst like a man on fire with some dreadful excitement, fixing his eyes upon the young man in a somber stare. Harry wondered just then if he were insane, but as he watched him closely he seemed to detect another drift and reason beneath his wild, unbalanced words. The man was drunk; his frenzy bore the exaggerated stamp of intoxication to his mind. He met his stare coldly.

"You have been drinking, Radford," he said sharply. "You had better take hold of yourself, man."

"What right have you to say so?" was the swift reply, given with a kind of snarl. "Look to yourself this night! My habits are nothing to you."

Harry regarded him steadily.

"We will have no more words now," he said. "I will see you in the morning."

When he turned to leave the room the steward went back to the window and pulled aside the curtain to look out again into the fog. As he crouched there with his face against the pane he gave vent to a low cry of such misery that Harry stood petrified. In silence he watched the stooped figure staring out, like a man bemused, and once he heard him call upon the name of God aloud. The next moment the steward's head was turned towards the watcher on the threshold, and across the foggy intervening space their eyes met. Again the thought of madness returned to Harry, and he was conscious of a certain chill sensation in the blood as he finally turned away, closing the door quietly behind him.

II

Alone in the room, the steward left the window, and stood with uplifted head, listening, as it seemed, like a man in fear. Then he walked swiftly across to the door and stealthily turned the key. Coming back to the bureau, he went over it with the face of one in whom strange memories were springing to life. Hesitatingly he groped in one of the drawers, and drew forth a bunch of keys. With these in his hand he paused irresolute, like a man immersed in some secret problem of thought. Then, with another and more eager face, he stooped with the bunch of keys to a cupboard near. When he rose erect again he carried a bottle and glass in his hands. These he placed on the bureau, and measured out a full glass of whiskey with steady hand and eye.

Leaving it untasted, he turned to the bookshelf, running his eye along it in search of a volume. He found it: a small and leather-bound volume, with "Holy Bible" in gilt lettering on the back. Taking it from its niche, he sat down.

He opened it at the Old Testament, turning the books slowly, like a reader seeking an almost forgotten place. . . . Isaiah, Jeremiah, . . . Lamentations. . . . At the book of Ezekiel he paused. "It's here, somewhere; I remember now," he muttered to himself. The leaves slipped more slowly through his thick hands; chapter for chapter, page for page. At last he came to the portion he sought. Half aloud he read the tremendous words:

"The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones.

"And caused me to pass by them round about; and behold, there was very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.

“And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.”

He raised his head suddenly with a sobbing breath when he had read thus far, glancing about him with a look of dread. The room with its familiar objects seemed to calm his mind, and his eyes sought the open Bible before him again:

“Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

“Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones: Behold I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:

“And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord.”

“And ye shall know that I am the Lord.” Mechanically he read the last words again. And then, “Mercy!” he whispered. “God have mercy on me!” he whispered again. In the somber, fog-laden room his face was alive with the passion of fear. He stared vacantly about him, and saw the liquor at his side. The sordid apparition of a bottle seemed to hold his vision to the exclusion of all other things. Instinctively his hand stretched out towards the glass, but stiffened before his fingers touched it, and his lips set in dogged, mute protest. Long he stared at bottle and glass, like a man beset by the ravening importunity of a secret sin. The silent struggle was terrible and intense. His hand crept closer; strength slipped from him bit by bit. At last moral weakness prevailed. Radford’s fingers closed on the glass. He put to his lips, and swallowed the spirits at one gulp.

A look of immense relief came into his tortured face; but there was more than that. Behind the abasement and horror in his eyes glowed another and different

light. In some strange sinister fashion he seemed to have become another being under the fiery influence of the transforming draught; the eyes which stared about the room were no longer Robert Radford's, steward of Hilmerceux, but those of a changed and younger man. He saw wonderingly, dimly at first; a curious, groping, shaking look, like a man restored from oblivion or death.

With growing clearness some faint distant memory seemed to be struggling into the light within him. Frowningly he stood in the foggy room, as if waiting for it to emerge from the mist of his brain. Then a smile crossed his lips; a foolish smile, such as no living being had ever seen on the face of the steward of Hilmerceux before. Brokenly, with a remembering look, he hummed a bar or two of an unfamiliar air. It was the old harvest song which Ailsa thought she heard that night in her dream.

The sight of the bottle, standing near, turned his thoughts. With the song on his lips he refilled his glass, but even in the act of drinking he turned his head quickly round with the same listening air; and his glance rested on the fog-spanned window, like a man expecting to receive a summons from the depth of the fog outside. Uneasily he stood thus, his glass in mid-air. But no sound broke the intense stillness of the room. He put his empty glass on the bureau, and his glance traveled to the open Bible again. He read on:

“So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone.

“And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them above; but there was no breath in them.

“The sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them above.”

As before, he repeated the last words aloud, but now with a look of deadliest terror on his face. His eyes seemed

to fasten upon his right hand and arm, lying relaxed, thick and corded, across the bureau before him, between the glass and the book. He lifted his hand, examining it curiously, closing and unclosing it rapidly as if to see the muscles of the fingers at work. Then his crazed intelligence sought the words of the prophet once more:

“Thus saith the Lord God; Behold . . . I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves. . . .”

“Oh, God, it is true . . . the breath is in me . . . Behold your risen dead!”

He breathed these words in a faint whisper which seemed barely to issue from his lips before dying away in the thick air. White and shaken, he put forth his hand for the glass, but dropped it from his fingers in the act of carrying to his lips. A cry broke from him; he reeled, clutched at the bureau for support; and his listening face, turned towards the distant window, took on the rapt expression of one who hears a sound from afar.

“Hirondelle!” he cried. “Hirondelle, I hear ye! . . . Wait, steady now. . . . I’m coming, good dog!”

His eyes roved the room in search of something, and found it in a lantern hanging from a wall. He lifted the lantern from its hook and lit it. With it swaying in his hand he looked about him, as if in thought. From the chaos of his mind a confused coherence of his fixed idea emerged. “The cloak!” he muttered. “Better take my cloak and the torch as well.” He turned again to the bureau and ferreted in a drawer. When he withdrew his hand he held in it the key to the Place of Watch.

He moved towards the window and again flung it wide. The fog floated sullenly in and hung like a pall around his head. From the window he stared into it, holding his lantern high. Then, lifting a leg across the low sill, he slouched out into the night, disappearing instantly like a man gifted with invisibility at will. The fog closed

around him and cut him off from sight. The meager light of his lantern remained momentarily apparent, casting from the distance a faint and coppery glow. Then the fog swallowed it up as well.

III

In the quiet of his bedroom Harry reflected upon Radford's outburst downstairs, but could make nothing of it. He had behaved oddly, like a man in the grip of some strong feeling, but it was difficult to guess the cause. If he had not been drinking, he was like a man gone suddenly insane; temporarily, at least. Harry felt bound to act mercifully towards him because of his faithful and long-continued service towards the house. At the same time, his frenzy was a strange one. What had he meant by that wild talk of the fog of forty years ago, and God's curse on the house? What did he know about such things? Harry shook his head in perplexity; it was all very strange, and he did not understand it in the least. He decided to see Radford first thing in the morning, when he hoped that everything would be well.

The mist lay thick as ever outside, impenetrable, draping the window like a shroud. As that sight met his eyes, Harry's thoughts turned to the housekeeper's account of the great fog on the downs forty years back, when the late vicar had spent the night tolling a melancholy bell. In imagination he seemed to see the good priest now: a gaunt, dark figure with earnest, uplifted face showing clear in the lantern's ray, pulling slowly at the bell-rope in the cold gray church. *Ding-Dong-Dong!* Almost could he hear that feeble peal now, floating across the downs from Tullington through the thick film of the fog. A siren would have been better, though. . . . He pictured Hilmerceux as a great ship fog-bound in the downs, sending out mournful siren-blasts across the waste: sounds which would pierce the solitudes of the downs from Black Patch to Chanctonbury Ring.

That idea brought to his mind Ailsa's dream of the cottage adrift on the downs in a storm. She had dreamt that strange dream on the night of the death of her grandmother, who had been lost on the downs in a fog such as this forty years before. She had been a pretty girl then, something like Ailsa perhaps; and his grandfather had been fond of her—if Lady Hilmerceux had spoken the truth. But his grandfather had not gone in search of her—on that distant night, forty years ago, when she was lost. That had been left for the other man—for William Fenton—to do. How twisted was the coil of life! What had she thought, this village girl, when she came to her senses in Mouldering House at dawn, and found herself in William Fenton's arms? Had she loved him for saving her, or had she longed for the other pair of arms—his grandfather's—instead? And forty years afterwards, when she came to die, she had gone through, in fancy, that terrible experience again, and had uttered her husband's name with her last breath. Strange . . . in view of all things. But women were always strange.

He sat there drowsily, staring into a dying fire, this forgotten episode lingering in his brain. Humanity was really a curious thing when one came to think of it; so passive in exterior, but with what hidden depths beneath! Life was what went on within; the subtlety, the fire of it, hidden in the flesh. . . .

The lights seemed to flicker out into darkness. The room faded from him, and he slept.

As he dozed he seemed to have a confused sort of dream. In some strange way he was aware of the years slipping backward and taking him into the past. He was out on the downs in a great fog, but it was forty years before. A girl's figure flitted past him in the gloom, calling distractedly his name . . . "Harry, Harry!" In his dream he heard her distinctly, but his spirit was troubled to know whether she called for aid to his grandfather or him. When he attempted to go to her he found

himself powerless to move. Desperately he tried—in vain. Gradually the thick mantle of fog fell around her again, and she vanished from sight. In his agony he sought to utter Ailsa's name, but his lips made no sound. Then another shape was projected across his vision; the figure of a cloaked man striding through the fog with a lantern, a song upon his lips. The sound of his singing snapped the terrible bonds of restraint which held him. The downs and the fog vanished, and the familiar objects of the room swam into his ken. He sprang up from his chair.

IV

He awoke with the fancy that a few notes of this song still lingered in his ears, floating upward through the empty house in the stillness of the night. Fully awake, and shivering with cold, he shook his head impatiently at the absurdity of his thought. What had given him this odd sensation, when the house was as still as a grave? He looked around the room. The fire had died down to a decaying spark, and on the mantelpiece a silver clock pointed both hands to twelve. He stared at the clock for some moments before he was able to realize that he must have been asleep in his chair for nearly an hour. And next he wondered if the blanket of fog still lay as thick upon the downs as before.

Drawing the curtain, he saw that the fog was still there, but not of the same thickness as before. He opened the window and looked out.

"The fog is beginning to lift," he muttered, peering into it.

At the window he remained, watching. As he lingered there his ear caught a faint sound on the gravel of the winding drive. Letting the curtain fall, he watched through the narrowed chink. The next instant he saw a dim, trembling radiance, a mere fleck of yellow in the fog, floating like some disembodied light down the drive. But try as he would, he could not see who carried it; the human

figure which held the light was swallowed up in the fog. He waited, motionless, looking down at it: a smeared halo of orange which hovered about in the white film of vapor, like some uncanny corpse-candle astray from its grave. But this was no corpse-candle—some hand carried the light. Who wandered about in the night-time at Hilmerceux, a shadow amid shadows, in the thick cloaking of fog?

As he looked the light disappeared.

With a feeling of discomfort he lingered at the window, speculating vainly about the light, and wondering if it would return. Some minutes passed thus. The fog still lay thick on lawns, park and garden. Another five minutes went by. Then, as he stood there, he felt a sharp flick of cold, like a wet finger touching his face. The seaman within him knew that a storm was in the air.

It came, rushing with a great sound upon the house, sweeping away the fog with the might of strength overcoming the weak. From the flying mist the landscape began to emerge. Swiftly the night changed from blind whiteness to darkness and storm, in which sky and downs were merged together in indistinguishable shape. And in the changed atmosphere he saw the light again, shining with the clearness of an eerie signal from the Place of Watch.

CHAPTER XXX

THE VEILED DOWNS

I

Ailsa felt like a girl sinking in some vast spectral sea which had overwhelmed the world of air and light. The fog enveloped her in impalpable waves which cut off everything from her view. She changed her position slightly, but did not attempt to continue on her way. She smiled a little at this unaccustomed plight, amused at the idea of being lost on the downs she had known from childhood. But as she looked her smile faded away. All the familiar and friendly outlines of the landscape had vanished from sight, and the fog begirt her wherever she turned. The opaque whiteness now gave her the feeling of standing among clouds: clouds which tasted salt and cold and bitter on her lips. The downs seemed unstable beneath her feet.

She moved on a few steps, but stopped again. Her sense of direction was at fault, and she did not know where she was going. The fog, which fell about her like a fleecy cloud, at the same time encompassed her like a towering wall: a wall which receded from her as she walked, but closed about her again when she came to a standstill.

She sought to decide the best thing to do. When the fog had fallen Cissbury was behind her and Chanctonbury to the north-east, rising high against a December sky. Stump Bottom—where a bridle-path led to Steyning—lay on her right hand with some sheep grazing on its scrubby slope. She recalled looking down at them dotting the sides of the declivity, and thinking how lovely and familiar the tinkle of the bell sounded in the solitudes as the leader of the flock led them upward to better pasturage on the higher downs. A belt of pines and a coppice intervened

between her and the lofty tableland which sloped gently upward to the summit of the Ring. To the left a grassy path debouched diagonally across the lower downs to the village by the old coaching road, which led to Hilmerceux. Through the pines and the coppice, a rough track, barred by a gate at each end, led between trees to the high slope which swept up to Chanctonbury Ring, from where a path wound downwards to Tillington below. Was it better to make for the heights, or turn towards the village?

Irresolutely she considered this problem. The fog was not quite impenetrable at close range. She could still see a few feet before her, and the outline of objects a little beyond. Farther away it shut out everything, though not in the same solid fashion as before. It wavered and moved a little, like a great white curtain stealthily shaken, as if a faint wind was lost in its midst. This slight movement caused Ailsa to wonder if the breeze was blowing strongly enough on the wind-swept heights of the Ring to dispel the fog there. If there was any chance of that the upward path would be the better way. If she could reach the summit of Chanctonbury she would have no further cause for alarm. The sure instinct of a country-bred girl told her that this was not a mist or haze rising from the wet ground, but a denser and heavier sea fog rolling inland from the Channel across the downs, and therefore unlikely to spread downward upon the very much lower level of the Weald. On the other hand, the village was nearer. The fog was probably thicker on the lower levels of the downs, but it was safer and less hazardous to make for them than Chanctonbury.

Having reached this decision, Ailsa set about carrying it into effect. She turned in the direction she believed the village path to lie, and walked forward rapidly. But in a few moments she paused again. The ground was rough and unfamiliar beneath her feet, and quite unlike the springy footing of the open downs. She must have wandered off the soft downward path. Anxiously she gazed about her in the effort to catch a glimpse of some

landmark which would tell her where she was. But the fog fell around her everywhere, and it was thicker than before. She faced that realization with her first sensation of dismay.

But, though the fog was thicker, it had something of the fragile tenuity of a lace curtain. Perhaps it was the more impenetrable on that account; that opalescent fragility held her like a silken net. And the meshes were drawn closer. Ailsa had no doubt of that. When the fog had first descended upon her she was still able to see some little distance ahead. Now it had crept imperceptibly nearer.

Ailsa knew she was standing in an open space; but where it was she had no idea. She could hear nothing. There was something abysmal in the silence and solitude, like being alone in a dead world. She could no longer catch the faint tinkle of the sheep-bell, which might have told her which way to turn. She was alone on the empty downs.

"I cannot be lost," she murmured, but without conviction. Standing still, she sought earnestly to reassure herself. Impossible that she could be lost on the South Downs—*her* downs—those wide friendly spaces which had known her since she was a child! The Sussex downs were gentle and kind: not like Cornish moors, which toppled folk headlong from the rocks in the dark, to drown them in the sea. . . .

Once more she looked around her, seeking to regain her bearings. In vain. She shivered a little with cold. Summoning her fortitude, she went resolutely on.

II

The complete revelation of her fear came to her in a strange way. For some time she continued walking, keeping her face in the imagined direction of the village she was anxious to gain. To keep her mind occupied she hit on the expedient of counting her footsteps as she hurried along. With each additional tally hope rose higher in her breast, though the fog still held her in its circumambient

folds, dimming her eyesight and baffling her vision beyond the narrowest range. She went on hopefully until she had once more left the open turf for some deep and rough declivity, studded with the stumps of trees. She came to a standstill on this downward slope rather palpitatingly, asking herself where she was.

Out of the invisible region around her the tinkle of a sheep-bell answered that question with startling clearness. It was as ominous a warning to the girl as the clang of a bell-buoy to a ship in a dark night at sea. By its proximity she realized the truth. Again she was back on the slope of Stump Bottom, which she had crossed by more than an hour before. She had heard of lost people wandering in circles, but such things only happened in books and in distant lands. It was not the kind of mishap which befell an English girl walking on the Sussex downs. She told herself rather breathlessly that such a thing could not happen to her. But the sound of the sheep-bell, now a little farther away, carried a mournful affirmative to her ears.

She was farther away from shelter than ever, in a remote and lonely part of the downs. What should she do?

After moments of hurried reflection she turned completely round, with the intention of trying to retrace her steps. The fog rolled backward from her as she advanced, and closed in on her wake, as it had done before. But the previous situation was reversed; the fog which had just been following her now preceded her. There was something terrifying and fantastic in this dogged retreat and pursuit, like walking between two ghostly uplifted waves, which threatened but never fell. The fog creeping after was more disturbing than the fog which went before. Its stealthy pertinacity of pursuit affected the girl's nerves, and she began to glance nervously over her shoulder as she walked. At last she could bear it no longer, and turned and faced it with widened eyes. She went towards it, but it now shrank back as before. She ran, but it only fell the faster away.

Then a sudden darkening of the fog warned her that twilight was falling on the downs.

III

The shadow of the coming night gave a somber shading to the mist, causing it to assume strange shapes to the perceptions of the girl, now multiplied by fear. What faint light there had been died swiftly away, and darkness came in a stride. In the gathering blackness Ailsa started running again in the hope of reaching some shelter before it became quite impossible to see. Running on thus, she dashed into the low branch of a tree, which caught her hair savagely and scratched her face. The force of the contact tripped her, and she fell to the ground. Getting up quickly, she wondered where she had got to now.

In the dark circle of fog about her she caught a glimpse of mysterious and upright shapes, like a company of ghosts standing at attention. Going closer, she saw they were pine-trees. Again chance had given her a landmark for guidance, though not one which helped her very much. Still, she meant to use it, if she could. Moving noiselessly as a ghost herself over the thick carpet of pine-needles beneath her feet, she made her way cautiously through the trees. Where they thinned out she turned hesitatingly towards the left, and by accident rather than skill in the east brought up a moment later with her hand resting on the horizontal bar of a broad gate. She knew it to be the first of two gates which lay between her and the high uplands which led to Chanctonbury Ring. Between the gates was a furlong or more of woodland tract running between trees. From the second gate the downs lifted wide and open to the windy summit of the Ring. But could she hope to reach it through this veil of darkness and fog?

She slipped through the gate, but she was sensible that she had lost all knowledge of direction again as soon

as she left it behind. The night had now fallen, and the fog enveloped her as before. Her wanderings recommenced, but more aimlessly; without method or thought, or any idea where she was seeking to go. The fog which imprisoned her had dazed her, and she wandered on hopelessly, almost with the feeling that light had for ever deserted the beautiful earth, and that she was doomed to go on and on in this impalpable and invincible black vapor until death came to her relief. But she struggled wearily on through the desolate, shrouding mist, which caused her eyes to smart and made the effort of breathing an increasing oppression. And the fog seemed to grow thicker still.

IV

After a time she found her tired footsteps taking her across a great open space which appeared to lead upward. The fog seemed a trifle less dense here, and she found it less difficult to breathe. She felt as if she were scaling some majestic lonely height, though that was probably an illusion too, like so many of her conjectures that night. But her weary, bewildered brain had reached the point where reflection ceased. She was mechanically conscious of physical impressions, and was confusedly aware that she had been wandering for hours, but that was all. For the rest, she kept on doggedly in the utter stillness and gloom, with an instinctive caution as well, for the downs had pitfalls even in daylight, and in the fog she could not see where her footsteps fell. She was no longer able to run, or even to walk fast. Almost unconsciously she went on, weary and footsore, trepidation stirring in a tired brain. Where was this great slope taking her? She asked herself the question again and again. And at last, as if yielding to her pertinacity, a black shape loomed momentarily from the fog, but immediately vanished again. A moment later her hand touched a fence. On the other side she made out a clump of trees.

They grew thickly together, with little space between, and from them came whispers and murmurs like inarticulate voices in the dark. The faint breeze which caused them to speak thus reached Ailsa as well; just the merest puff of pure air, sufficient to touch her burning forehead like a cool hand's caress. Ailsa stood, drearily asking herself where these trees were, and how this little wind came to be stirring at this point, in contrast with the utter breathlessness of the downs elsewhere. The fog was just as thick here, surging and billowing in great waves, but a wind, however slight, suggested that at last it might lift or be blown away.

With her outstretched hand holding fast to the wire of the fence, Ailsa set out cautiously to explore. The fence led her on and on, and always on the other side there were trees. Then the fence took her through some trees, but not for long. Again she was edging carefully along with the dim shapes of trees on her right hand, and on her left an impenetrable gray bank of mist. At last she grew tired of this, and releasing her hold on the cold wire of the fence, turned towards the ghostly gray fog, which surged and billowed about her. She took a step into it, and then another. The next moment she was conscious of slipping, falling. . . .

Instinctively she realized that she had stepped over the brink of some steep incline which fell away from the fence sharply, and she flung herself downward at full length, clutching at the short grass to stay her fall. By a great effort she struggled and pulled herself up the slope until one hand touched the wire of the fence. With level ground beneath her again she rose to her feet, breathless and dishevelled, and trembling a little with the shock, wondering where her wanderings had brought her to now.

The answer came in another and stronger puff of wind, visibly stirring the mist which hung about her face like a thick gray veil. Another moment and the wind was blowing strongly and coldly on her face, breaking the spell of the fog which had held her so long, driving the

mist before it, and revealing glimpses of a dark landscape far below. The wind, rising with swift force, rent the fog savagely, pursuing the floating fragments like some great rushing monster of the sky. The fleeing white shapes of the vanishing fog began to dissolve in the rising gale, and Ailsa discerned where she was. She was standing on the summit of Chanctonbury Ring.

The girl felt inclined to cast herself on the lap of the mother of the downs and go to sleep. She was exhausted and utterly weary, with burning face and quivering limbs. A great sob shook her. Bowing her head on her hands, she sunk to the steep and grassy slope, and passed into a troubled oblivion which was more like unconsciousness than sleep.

The oblique gleam of a flash of lightning, falling diagonally across the summit, flitted over her face and awakened her. Returning to wakefulness with a start, she found herself sitting upright on the edge of the Ring, staring downward at the shivering gleaming arabesque in black and silver of the Weald beneath.

She had never been on Chanctonbury Ring at night before. Looking down from it now like a girl at the gateway of a higher world, her fevered imagination, returning wearily to consciousness, seemed to see another Weald to the one she had hitherto known. It was the Weald she had read of, in the library of Hilmerceux; a Weald of forests, in which lurked wolves and deer and wild boar. The gray walls of Anderida gleamed amid the dark edging of a distant wood. Sitting there, like a spectator in the topmost tier of seats at a play, Ailsa seemed to have a revelation of that savage and forgotten past, enacted upon the flat stage of the Weald beneath. As the lightning flashed more brightly the towering mass of the fortress built by Roman hands showed defiantly against the sky, and she could see the swart faces of the British defenders, looking out across the plain. In the dappled light the woods were full of Saxons, blond and fierce and brutal, marching towards the fortress beneath

the standard of the flapping raven of Ælla. They bore ashen spears, and towered above the small and swarthy Britons. Darts and arrows began to fly, and Ailsa seemed to hear the clash of shields and shafts. . . . Anderida was forced at last, and the Saxon adventurers poured in. Their shouts rang out, their trumpets sang. . . . Ah, they were fighting on the stone stairs now. The fight was over, and the last Briton put to the sword. The invaders withdrew, disappearing through the forests. Darkness was falling on the Weald, but the stars gleamed on the fallen fortress and what it hid. What was that thing slinking among the ruins? It lifted its head and howled; a horrid, long-drawn cry which chilled her blood. There came another and another! Hundreds now; fighting and snarling over the slain.

Then she understood. Wolves. . . .

The fantasy vanished. Forests, fortress, Saxons, slain Britons, and wolves—all disappeared like a flash. Once more Ailsa was looking down at the peaceful Weald she had always known, with houses and farms and villages sleeping peacefully beneath a Sussex sky. There were no wolves and forests and fortresses left in England to-day . . . no worship of Thor, no rites of Freia. . . . She was alone on Chanctonbury Ring . . . alone on the downs. . . .

What was she to do? She knew that she could not stop on top of the Ring for the remainder of the night. With a determined effort she recalled her wandering senses and struggled to her feet, her limbs numb with cold. Dazedly she looked around her, trying to form a course of action. From the Ring a narrow path descended to the Weald and Tullington. There was rest and shelter there, she supposed. But she was so tired that she knew she would not be able to reach it.

A darkening of the sky and the rumble and mutter of thunder caused her to look upward with an anxious eye. Clouds were racing up from the sea and banking overhead; the naked trees within the Ring sang with a shriller note. Ailsa saw that a great storm was gathering. The realiza-

tion roused her finally. She knew it would be foolish to be caught on the summit of Chanctonbury in the coming storm.

Another flash of lightning came from the low sailing clouds which hovered above Chanctonbury's head. It flooded with dazzling whiteness the desolate panorama of the Ring, the dewpond adjacent, and the dark wooded sides of the northern slope. It showed Ailsa something more: a long, low building of stone with a window in the roof, crouching as if in slumber in a deep glen at the bottom of four hills, which fell away almost at her feet—the deserted and solitary place known as Mouldering House.

CHAPTER XXXI

A SECRET OF THE SEA

I

Harry's lips parted in an exclamation as his eyes fell upon the light, and he stepped swiftly back from the window. Who was down at the ancient Place of Watch, shut in by the night fog? The steward? That was something he would find out at once. With the impulse of immediate resolve he left the room without a moment's delay, and passed quietly along the shadowy corridor to the stairs. Descending, he crossed the great hall in the darkness, and let himself out by the hall door.

Rain was beginning to fall, and the wind moaned beneath a black marble sky. The lake gleamed in the distance, and the tree-tops tossed wildly in the rising gale. Through the driving storm he hurried along the carriage drive to the Place of Watch.

The turn of the drive brought the light into vision again; a faint yellow ray shining fitfully through the trees. In the darkness it appeared to his eyes of an ethereal luminosity, like some faint and trembling aura set in a tabernacle of the dead. He gazed at it steadfastly for a moment, then went on.

As he crossed the grass it shone more steadily than before, coming with a brighter gleam through the chill blackness of the night. He crossed the intervening space with tense expectancy, and the light shone from the Place of Watch as though to lure him on. At length the bulk of gray masonry loomed over him, and he stood before the grille. From within the closed Place came a subdued and flickering glow, which fell through a chink in the wall across the darkness and silvered the bars of the grille at

which he stood. The young man watched the long, wavering ray with an uneasy air, and then moved a step nearer to the grille.

"Who's there?" he called.

Thunder muttered above, but there was no reply to his call. The light burnt on in silence within, and fell in a single ray from the slit above his head. Harry watched it streaming for a moment, and asked himself if it would be possible to scale the grille. He placed his hand on the bars, and to his surprise the grille swung backward with a creak.

"Is some one hiding here?" he thought, "or have I come too late?"

Steeling himself for a possible encounter, he entered the narrow courtyard with noiseless feet. His blood coursed a little more rapidly as he reached the inner door. The quaint iron handle yielded beneath his hand, and the door fell back.

He looked within, but paused on the threshold as though rooted there. The Place of Watch was empty.

The glow came from a lantern placed in a high niche above the great clock face, and its light fell upon an empty interior and naked walls. His feeling of breathless expectation was replaced by one of extreme surprise. Who had brought the light there and set it, burning, in this secret place? He looked around him sharply, and lingered, listening at the door. The wind sighed about the stonework, and something rustled and whispered in the gloom overhead. Above, the lantern burnt steadily in its niche.

"What is the meaning of this?" he said aloud.

With an effort he screwed up his nerves and passed within the doorway. The flags rang sharply beneath his feet as he walked. Crossing to the clock, he lifted the lantern from its niche. The light, held high, threw its rays about the room. It fell upon the great clock and the grave sad face of Time; on the carven leer of a stone mask by the door; and on the hanging spiral of the

broken staircase in the shadow of the farthest wall. The heir saw these things as he swung the lantern about. But the light brought no crouching or hidden figure into view. There was no one there. Again he wondered what the explanation could be of this inexplicable thing.

"Some one had been here and gone," he told himself. "But why?"

His eyes went around the room again, and rested upon an old oaken chest near the clock. The lid was raised. That gave him an idea. Was it to open it that the nocturnal visitant had come to the Place of Watch? Acceptance of such a theory seemed trivial, but in what other way could the mystery be explained? At least the point was worth putting to the test.

He went to the chest and bent over it. The contents seemed a queer jumble of things. The chest was half full of musty articles of clothing and tarnished fabrics; some books and miscellany of odds and ends. But the thing which caught his eye was an orderly array of papers, neatly tied and folded, lying uppermost upon an old jacket spread out near the top. He took the documents up to examine them. As he did so a small packet fell from them to the floor.

Picking it up, he unfolded the covering of brown paper in which the object was contained. Within was a small morocco case, shabby and worn, and mildewed too. He opened it, and the tinted photograph of a girl was revealed.

As his glance took in the picture he gave a start. Instantly he recognized it: the pretty girl with the soft, fair hair, wistful eyes, and weakly loving mouth. With indescribable surprise he gazed upon it, puzzled beyond measure at finding it there. For he had a photograph of the same girl in his room upstairs: in the small silver oval frame which Captain Andrée had found in a cave off the Cornish coast many years before.

"But how on earth does this one come to be here?" he thought.

He stood there motionless, gazing down upon the photo-

graph in his hand, trying to account for its presence in that place. A singular coincidence indeed! Mechanically he turned it over and saw some faded words in a girl's unformed hand on the back. Holding it nearer, he read:

To William Fenton, from Esther.

Outside the thunder pealed, and lightning flashed across the sky. The storm had risen to its height. But in the Place of Watch, Harry still looked intently upon the little picture by the lantern's ray. For a moment he no longer sought the meaning of its presence there. Another and more bewildering thought was dawning in his mind. As he looked it became clear to him: a faint and inexplicable resemblance which had haunted him in the past.

"Ailsa!" he exclaimed at last. "Yes, yes! The likeness is plain. A different and weaker Ailsa—but Ailsa nevertheless. I can see the resemblance now. But why couldn't I see it before?"

He looked around him with a puzzled air.

"My head goes round," he murmured. "What does all this mean?"

As if in answer to the question the voice of Captain Andrée seemed to reach him across the years.

II

The setting of the story was the strip of sea which dashes against the towering Cornish coastline from Land's End to Pordenack Point, as seen from the bridge of the four-mast barque *Josephine*—inward bound with a mixed cargo for Plymouth—on a fine summer's day many years ago. Captain Borlase was on the bridge, with his second mate, Pierre Andrée, beside him. The captain was a West Countryman, versed in the irregular tides and enormous swells of England's western gateway, and he kept his ship well out from the long Atlantic rollers which surged in ugly fashion closer in. With the ship making slow way in a faint wind, he pointed out the rocks as they slipped

by; for his second mate had never been off the Cornish coast before. That was the Longships on Carn Bras, and the lesser rock near it was Tal-y-mean. The tall rock to the south, covered with seaweed, was the Dollah, and the bigger one not far away was the Armed Knight—two hundred feet high at least. And there was the Enys—the Enys Dodman, to give it the full name—a queer place, with a cavern forty feet high running through it. Captain Borlase remembered getting out to it at low tide once, when he was a boy. Damned venturesome thing to do, but boys were like that. The Enys was off Pordenack Point, where there was a great hole in the under side of the cliffs called Lion's Den. Captain Borlase also recalled, when he was a boy, that a ship was driven into it one night during a storm and every soul aboard her lost.

The rock—the other rock—came into Captain Borlase's narrative just then, rising from the surface of the sea a little distance away; rugged and worn, with long seaweed floating at the base where the dissolving green rose and fell away. Young Andrée pointed to a dark hole, like a cave, high up in its rugged gray side. "A strange rock, *mon capitaine!*" Captain Borlase, checked in his reminiscitory flow, merely grunted in reply that there were some damned queer rocks off that part of the Cornish coast.

It was at that point a faint light flashed from the darkness of the hole—like a signal. The two men on the bridge of the *Josephine* exchanged dumbfounded glances. "*Hola! que vous en semble?*" Andrée exclaimed. "What the devil!" ejaculated Captain Borlase, who knew no French. A devil—*parbleu!*—a devil of a light indeed. . . . *Voilà*: Behold the light again! Once—twice more it flashed across the intervening water through the glittering sunshine into the astonished eyes of the captain and mate of the *Josephine*. The mate pronounced that a poor castaway was up in that hole, signalling for help—perhaps thanking the good God for sending the *Josephine* that way. Captain Borlase, staring suspiciously, said it was a damned

queer go. Why didn't whoever was up there come and show himself at the mouth of the beastly hole? "The unhappy man may be crippled," Andrée indignantly replied. "Then how the deuce did he get up there?" Captain Borlase answered. "Why, that hole is nearly thirty feet above the water-line." Andrée volunteered to climb the rock and see.

A boat was lowered. He narrated vividly how the great rock at closer range took on the semblance of a grim carved face staring downward at the boat with four men drawing near the base, where long fronds of purple seaweed, rooted in its furrowed sides, floated like living filigree. Above, the sunlight flickered on the opening of the cave from where the light had come. Andrée sprang from the stern-sheets to a ledge of the rock above the lapping water and told the men in the boat to back off and wait for him.

The face of the rock was slippery and wet, but seamed with crevices, where tufts of seaweed and rank grass afforded excellent hold. By the aid of these growths ("the whiskers on the rock's face," Andrée described them) he mounted with comparative ease for two-thirds of the way, and was then confronted with the first real test of his climbing skill—a dozen feet or so of bare and polished surface between him and the mouth of the cave. He went on—how did they say it in English?—yes: like a fly clinging to a wall, and with the reflection that if he slipped he could but fall into the sea. (At this point of his narrative he was wont to shrug and smile.) Yes, yes; he went on . . . Wriggling up higher, clinging to the face of the rock, and finally pulling himself up to the narrow ledge or lip which projected from the entrance of the hole.

He described his sensations on this precarious perch. His eyes surveyed a vast expanse of sea and sky, the *Josephine* in the offing, motionless as a model ship in a glass case; and directly underneath him the boat which had brought him to the rock; her crew, seen like dolls, staring with upturned faces at him like—yes; the fly—a

fly on the face of the rock. In the distance the Cornish coastline loomed, trembling and dissolving in the sun like some wonderful mirage of the sea.

From a contemplation of these things he turned to the task in hand, and entered the hole. A long ray of sunshine guided him in, gleaming blue in the darkness of the interior like a phosphoric gleam in a grotto beneath the sea. It partly revealed the shadowy interior of a small cave; a cave in mid-air, intensely cold; damp also, and wet underfoot, as if the spray of the sea or storms penetrated there—but empty.

That was the amazing thing: the cave was empty. There was no living being there; no imprisoned soul who had sent out those mysterious flashes into the sunlight for aid. Nothing! Relief surged up in Andrée at that discovery. He had not known what he expected to find, but he was heartily thankful not to see some poor maimed fellow-creature lying there in the darkness, cut off from his kind on this dismal rock in a deep sea. His own sensation at that moment was that of a man buried alive in a tomb of rock. The stillness, the gloom, and the dampness . . . *ma foi!* the resemblance was too close. But it was just then that his ear, attuned to the utter stillness, caught a faint whispering sound, which seemed to come from a shadowy aisle of the cave, rising and falling in sibilant cadence, like a secret conversation in the dark.

He stood there listening intently, with—yes—a little fear. Fear comes to all men at times; why be ashamed of it? An honorable fear—this. The detestable muttering went on; a hissing undertone, like a lost soul in the caverns of the damned. And suddenly the explanation came to him—entered his seaman's mind. The cave, at that altitude, was a kind of whispering gallery, and every breeze from the sea which entered its mouth was caught and made audible in the hollow recesses and seaworn passages. That faint and mournful protest of imprisoned air had probably sounded in the cave since the dawn of time. Of course—of course. And—equally of course—

his was the first foot that had ever trod the damp oozing surface of that cave in mid-air. *Eh bien!* it was well. He smiled indulgently at his previous fears. But immediately the smile died off his face. This was not to account for the light. The light! Decidedly he and Captain Borlase had seen it there. Where had it come from?

As if in answer to his unspoken question a bright beam of light darted from the gloom before him, flashing into his face. He stood transfixed with amazement, staring about him with an incredulous and almost shocked air, like a man whose vision has been dazzled by some mischievous urchin using a piece of glass to refract the rays of the sun. The next moment he observed that a slanting ray of sunshine had penetrated deeply from behind him into the cave, and its brilliance fell like some moving, pointing finger upon a small and shining object in the dark.

Striking a match, Andrée went forward and ascertained that the shining object was a small oval frame of tarnished silver and glass, resting on a ledge of the cave some feet above the rocky floor. The mystery of the flashes stood revealed. An occasional long ray of sunshine fell upon the glass, which acted as a reflector to refract it back through the mouth of the cave, thus causing the darting flashes which Andrée and Captain Borlase had seen from the bridge of the *Josephine*.

It came home to Andrée with something like a shock that some one had been in the cave after all. With the photograph in his hand, he looked about him with a strained and nervous air, half expecting (as he said) to see the owner of the little frame advancing towards him through the gloom. But there was no one there. The ray of sunshine died away; once again the darkness and silence were unbroken within the cave, save for the faint, unceasing whisper of the wind within the shadowy aisle. Andrée went nearer to the mouth of the cave, and in the better light examined the picture he had found on the

ledge. The tarnished frame held the photograph of a girl. Her sweet eyes met his wistfully, but held the secret safe. Indeed, her lips were sealed. She could tell him nothing: nor what dark mischance had brought her picture there. Only her framed and girlish face remained as sad evidence of some strange and forgotten mystery of the sea.

The long-drawn sound of a ship's siren floating mournfully across the water recalled the young officer to the realities of life. Placing the oval frame carefully in his pocket, he went to the mouth of the cave and looked down at the waiting boat beneath him in the shadow of the rock. The sun suffused the sea with rosy light, turning its smooth surface into a mirror which reflected the great rock and his own figure bending over from the ledge. One of the marionettes in the boat underneath gesticulated upward with his oar as a signal that the second mate was ordered to return. The boat looked very small: a toy boat manned by four dolls, with bits of wood in their hands. Andrée thought how astonished they would be should he dive down to them from that height. Then he turned to descend. The descent was far easier than the climb. The boat backed in close to the sheer cliff, and he dropped lightly in. The men looked at him curiously, and the boatswain ventured to remark upon the length of time he had been in the cave. "The Capt'n's been sounding the siren for you," he explained.

Andrée nodded curtly, and told the men to pull back to the ship. Captain Borlase was impatiently awaiting his return, fuming at the delay. The story of the second mate's find made scant impression upon him, and he barely glanced at the portrait in his subordinate's hand. Stranger things happened at sea, he said, as the other would discover if he followed that arduous profession for long. Yes; and more especially off the Cornish coast. They would pass another rock presently—the Irish Lady—where a woman had once been taken off after clinging to it all night. A wreck, of course. What else did one

expect off such a coast? The freshening of the breeze silenced him. He turned away, anxious to get on with the voyage.

The experience made a far deeper impression on the young French mate. From the deck he kept his glasses fixed on the rock, watching it dwindle as the *Josephine* kept on her course. The sun sank beneath the horizon, and shadows deepened upon the flat surface of the sea. As if summoned by a hidden gesture, they thronged like phantoms around the distant rock, partly shrouding it from Andrée's eyes. At last it disappeared from view like a shape pulled down into the deep, and the watcher on the *Josephine* saw it no more.

He kept the oval frame as long as he lived, and when he lay dying he gave it to one whom he loved as a son: to the young man who now stood looking down on its duplicate in his hand, with the memory of Captain Andrée's story wonderingly revived in his mind.

CHAPTER XXXII

SHELTER AT MOULDERING HOUSE

I

As Ailsa looked down uneasily into the dark hollow where Mouldering House stood, she knew it offered a refuge from the coming storm. But the girl shuddered at the thought of seeking shelter in that shunned and deserted place, which she had reason to fear. Its grim propinquity set her nerves quivering more, and brought back again the memory of the uncanny events of the night of her grandmother's death. With a feeling of dread she turned away.

A few drops of rain fell sharply, lashing her face. The rising gale sprang at her like an avenging force. Ailsa knew she must not linger there; a great storm was not a thing to be lightly faced upon the higher elevation of the uplands. Chanetonbury, mother of the downs, was also mother of the winds, which rioted joyously in her open arms. They were rioting now, with rather an awful kind of glee, tossing the trees of the Ring like plumes, and rushing at the cowering figure of the girl as though seeking to throw her off the summit into Weald. Once she staggered, and fell. The Ring seemed to whirl around her. Steadying herself with an effort, she set out for the lower slopes.

With head bent against the wind Ailsa made a start for the first downward slope. At first she won her way foot by foot, spurred to the effort by the feeling that each toilsome step was carrying her farther from that dreadful house at the foot of the four hills. Beyond that she had little thought just then, so breathless and buffeted was she in the roaring gale. For some time it took all her

strength of will and limb to struggle against its fury, but presently she was gratefully aware, by its lessening violence, that she had reached a lower and more sheltered part of the downs. Her descent continued until the wind ceased to trouble her at all. She looked about her, but in the utter blackness of the night she could not tell where she was. She had the idea she was on some unfamiliar part of the downs. But where? The path she was treading descended more steeply than before, and the last slippery portion of it took her down almost at a run. When she was able to stop, all breathless, she was on level ground. It was the bottom of the slope, and again she asked herself whereabouts on the downs was this dark place. Then her heart seemed to stand still as her eyes fell upon the outline of a building before her. With a start she recognized the place she had been trying to leave behind. She was face to face with the sinister exterior of Mouldering House.

She looked at it with the miserable consciousness that she had descended to it by the steepest of the four hills from the rear: a path she had never previously had the courage or curiosity to explore. This night she had taken it unwittingly, and against her will. The deadening sensation came to her that she had reached the predestined end of that night's aimless wanderings: an end in which fog and wind and storm had each its ordained share. Useless to try and get away, when all was pre-arranged! She stared about her wild-eyed, like a trapped thing too exhausted to escape.

The storm had broken, and was sweeping across the heights. Overhead the clouds wheeled and galloped about a wild sky, but she was sheltered from the tempest in a kind of breathless calm, as remote from the elements as a valley of the dead. The house before her slumbered beneath the storm, secure at the foot of its hills, indifferent to the uproar above. With a sudden quickening of fear Ailsa looked at the windows. But no

light gleamed from them that night. All was dark and silent within.

Great raindrops fell, heavy and chill. The four enveloping hills which screened Mouldering House from the winds did not keep off the rain. It fell with angry force, as though from a great height, and Ailsa knew she would soon be wet through if she did not take shelter in the house from the storm. In the pelting rain she ran round to the gap in the wall where the gate had been, and splashed through pools of rain-water across the courtyard to the entrance of the house.

The door stood open. The strangeness of this did not occur to Ailsa just then. Hurriedly she crossed the threshold to the dark passage within, where her strength and courage gave way, and she sank half-crouching on the floor, listening to the rain thundering on the roof above her head. But she did not remain in the passage for long. Its darkness and narrowness terrified her, and made her feel as though she were lying in a deep grave with water pouring into it from above. With an effort she struggled to her feet, and groped in the darkness of the passage for a door.

Almost at once her fingers slid from stone to wood, and gripped upon a piece of metal which seemed to be the handle of a door. Her touch was sufficient to swing the door ajar. It fell back with disconcerting swiftness, as if pulled sharply from within, revealing a large and empty room.

Into its dark emptiness Ailsa peered hesitatingly, then ventured slowly in. Through the barred window came a faint light from outside, which lessened the interior gloom. Ailsa's heart thrilled as she recalled that it was at this window she and Harry had once stood and looked within. Now she was alone in the house, with her dreary thoughts and fears.

With hands clasped she stood, irresolute, fearful, glancing about her. Her eyes seemed to discern the outline

of strange shapes on the walls. They appeared to be like vague figures of angels and devils, surmounted by loose waving scrolls. Their presence there did not reassure her, nor lessen the throbbing of her nerves. In the gloom she felt these unseen things were watching her with spectral gaze. That idea frightened her so much that she dragged her weary body to the window, where she leant against the iron bars, and stared out in the night.

Outside the rain fell in torrents, but Ailsa's thoughts were not of the storm. Nor was her state of mind wholly the outcome of fear. She was haunted by the realization that what had befallen her on the downs this night had happened to her grandmother in similar fashion twenty years before she was born. The fog and her wanderings; the storm and this dreadful sheltering-place: each detail in the terrible experience of forty years ago was repeating itself with a kind of tragic uniformity, like a thing decreed and decided upon before her birth. Her mind misgave her that this was a coincidence too grim and deadly to be chance.

II

These thoughts of the past were emerged and forgotten in present fear. It was too awful to be alone in this baleful place, in a stillness and silence which seemed imbued with some mysterious existence of its own. Terror swarmed in her brain as she stood and gazed into the darkness with frightened eyes. Shadows formed and whispered in corners, and dissolved again, leaving her transfixed with the conviction that they were not of the earth. She thought again of the evil reputation of Mouldering House, and the many years it had been shunned. And the other memory returned to her: of that night when the light glimmered from its emptiness like a signal across the downs. Mouldering House had played some awful part in her grandmother's life; was it to have

a similar influence upon her own? She had been brought there against her will that night.

At this thought her fears almost escaped bounds, but she struggled desperately to retain some measure of self-control. She wondered if her thronging fancies might be better kept at bay in another room. This one, with its wavering, changing figures on shadowy walls, seemed to be turning her brain. Even the narrow passage, frightening though she had found it, was to be preferred. She looked towards the doorway awfully. It required all her courage to face the throng of nodding shadows by the door, but it was better than staying where she was. She rushed across the room at last with a wildly beating heart, and found herself in the passage once more.

Standing in the darkness of the passage she could see the rain falling like a spout across the open front door. Her eyes searched the gloom of the passage at the other end, and seemed to discern the outline of stone steps descending to a lower level. It was as if the passage fell away sharply there, though of that she could not be sure. Listening intently, she heard a faint and regular splash, like water falling into water from a height. Fearfully she asked herself what this sound meant. For what dark mediæval purpose had Mouldering House been built, and to what use had it been put since? She had read at Hilmerceux of old houses like it with ancient crypts, where antiquaries had unearthed forgotten coffins and urns and more dreadful things still—rottenness and bones and decaying death. She recalled the account of the finding of a crypt near Tullington which had filled archæologists with joy. In it internments were discovered of holy women laid to rest centuries ago. One coffin of Sussex marble held human bones and teeth, a gold crucifix, and twenty beads of amber and jet. Another yielded up a skull and a crumbling staff. The staff had been gilded, but the wood had rotted away, and only the gold-leaf remained: all that was left of the lady-prioress, buried with her official staff. In another coffin, only the enamel of some teeth remained.

. . . And there were lead coffins found deep in water, filled with slacked lime. . . .

In print these horrors had been set forth calmly, with enthusiastic comment. Perhaps Mouldering House had a crypt like that—where the passage came to an abrupt end. Ailsa had a vision of stagnant waters, and drifting coffins of dead nuns. She might have walked straight down there when she first entered, and fallen headlong in the darkness, with a loud cry. . . .

These thoughts were more deteriorating than those before. With a glance over her shoulder Ailsa crept back into the room she had left. It seemed now less disturbing than the passage, where the rain fell in a hissing curtain across the open door, and water dropped solemnly on water at the other end.

Again she was conscious of the lighter air, as if the drenched ray of a late-rising moon had penetrated some cranny of the fourfold hills. The light glimmered faintly on bare walls and floor, and for the first time she discerned a sort of alcove on the farther side of the room. Ailsa went nearer to it, and found it to be an ancient settle of oak with projecting sides, affixed to the wall. In her exhaustion she was grateful for its presence there. She sank down upon it, and the deep oaken sides seemed to shelter her with protecting arms. Her head drooped against the corner of the settle as though a pillow had been placed there. Taut nerves and overstrung imagination relaxed before more imperative bodily needs. Her eyes closed from sheer fatigue. The next instant she was fast asleep.

III

She returned to partial wakefulness with the impression of a sound in the darkness outside, but so close was she to the borderland of unconsciousness that this might have been the echo of a dream. Gradually she was sinking back to sleep when a gleam of light flitted into the room.

Her half-closed eyes took uncomprehending note of its course as it darted about the floor and then mounted the farther wall. Still nearly asleep, Ailsa imagined it to be a shaft of moonlight.

In the state between sleeping and waking the eyes receive impressions without the optic nerve transmitting their meaning to the brain. At such times the alert inward sentinel of the subconscious mind appears to slumber as well. The brain sleeps on in darkness, but imagination is partly awake. Impressions are received by the sleeper, but their actual meaning is not perceived.

It was in this restricted state of consciousness that Ailsa took in many things by means of that glancing ray of light. Her sleep-filled eyes followed its course as it glided over the shadowy figures on the wall, revealing them as pictures painted there. Ailsa did not know they were mural paintings of a great age, nor what the mediæval Latin on the scrolls meant, but the drawings were wonderful and fascinating to see. There were devils, angels, serpents; haggard saints in robes; a great figure of Christ, with arms outstretched, and above His sad face the Crown of Thorns. She beheld angels sounding long trumpets in blue skies, and Holy Virgins rising ecstatically from purgatorial fires. She saw St. Michael, peacock-winged, astride a scaly dragon, and weighing souls, with the Devil casting in his weight against the souls on the scale. These crude religious allegories and conceptions of a monkish age, ribboned with Latin scrolls, became visible before Ailsa's wondering eyes. Portions of the inscriptions were imprinted on her mind, though she did not understand the meaning of the words . . . *Jesus Nazareus . . . Ail Temere . . . Quare Tui Sunt Serba . . . Mageantior Aequo An Debet Dolor Esse Viri . . . Capellano Leprosorum*

Leprosorum . . . lepers. . . The floating filaments of her waking consciousness twined around the word as something vaguely familiar. At Hilmerceux she had come across a strange old volume in the library which told of a leper hospital founded in Sussex during the twelfth cen-

ture, and supported by a monastery on the shores of the Channel, at the foot of the downs. The good monks, Ailsa had read, waited on the pitiful inmates whom others shunned, washing their hands and feet.

. . . "Lazars, men out of their wits and mind, and poore women with childe." . . . *Leprosorum* . . .

Faintly remembered fragments of her reading stirred in her brain. She sought blindly to recollect them. Slowly, yet coherently, they began to emerge.

The subconscious effort to recall them awakened her completely. With a start she sat upon the settle, staring about her in the dark.

Memory came back to her at once. Fully aroused, all her fears returned. The room was dark and strangely silent, but she knew the light had been there. Her heart beat loud within her, shaking her frame. For she felt her impressions to be realities, and not the dissolving illusions of a half-awakened mind. She had seen the light, the strange pictures on the wall, and the Latin words which recalled the story of the lepers in the book. But how came the moon to be so bright, and why was it not shining into the room now?

The sound of the rain had almost ceased outside, except for an occasional pattering drop upon the roof. Her eyes sought the window to ascertain if the storm had passed away. Through the bars of the window the darkness loomed, backed by the rising shadow of a hill.

And then in the stillness she heard a noise: a faint and peculiar flapping sound.

The coldness of death seemed to run in her veins. It was as though that empty house had cried aloud, and uttered some dreadful warning in her ears. What was the sound outside? Who was coming to this place in the dead of night? She did not know; she dared not try to guess. She strove desperately for calmness, clutching at sanity like a rock. There was no one coming—there was nothing there. No, no! God would not be so cruel. It was her

fancy: that was all. She must not give way to such alarms. She must be calm, and not afraid.

Fear held her motionless, although she could hear nothing now. She sat with her ears strained for the faintest sound. That flapping noise. . . . What had made it? What was lurking in the darkness outside? Was this place a lazar-house in sober truth? Her terrified imagination pictured some creeping and awful form, too terrible to behold, wrapped in a cloak and dragging its way towards the house.

Suddenly she remembered the door. It was open. If only she had courage to rush out and shut it. But she did not dare.

She could see something at the window: peering through . . .

The icy stillness of despair came to her. Her eyes had a momentary vision of the outline of a face at the window, staring at her through the gloom. It vanished and the next instant the slamming of a door resounded through the house.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RETROSPECT AND SEARCH

I

As he looked upon the faded case and papers Harry realized that Captain Andrée's find must be a link in the disappearance of his grandfather off Cornwall forty years before. He owed his inheritance to that forgotten tragedy of the past, and this discovery, so strangely made, filled him with a sense of mystery and awe. But a greater cause for bewilderment remained in the different places where the two photographs had been found: the one, an oaken chest in the Place of Watch; the other, a cave in mid-air above a lonely Cornish sea. The pictured face of this girl, whom two men had loved, seemed like a wandering spirit, dwelling in cold abodes, able to defy time.

Strange and inscrutable vitality! Who could guess what it meant? He felt like a man accidentally possessed of the key of some dark secret which he hesitates to explore. With reluctance he turned to the papers in his hand and unfastened the string which held them together. Within were some yellowed clippings from an old newspaper and a bundle of old letters. He glanced at the letters first, but could make no guess at their contents. But, though stained and indecipherable now, they had been written by the hand of a woman. From one a lock of soft, fair hair fluttered, which he picked up and carefully restored.

Next his eye sought the printed slips. Cut from a Cornish newspaper forty years old, they told of a body washed up near Nanjizel Bay, and the subsequent inquest at the village inn. The first paragraph spoke of

the finding of the body, and added the information that the inquest was postponed to await evidence of identity from Sussex, from where the drowned man was believed to have come. The other cutting reported the inquiry, and in it the names of Lady Hilmerceux and Esther Fenton appeared. Esther Fenton—described as “the widow of the deceased”—had given evidence, identifying the drowned man as her husband, who had accompanied the Honorable Harry Hilmerceux to Cornwall a fortnight before. Reading on, Harry came to understand that William Fenton was a foster-brother of Harry Hilmerceux, and since boyhood had been employed on the Hilmerceux estate. A strong attachment had existed between the two, and Fenton had accompanied the other to Cornwall on this fishing trip as a servant and humble friend.

Harry paused to picture the scene: the inn, the room, and the two girls from Sussex; both affected by this tragedy, though in different ways. Clearly the young mistress of Hilmerceux knew nothing of the other’s secret then, and Esther was not likely to have enlightened her. There was a subtle flavor of irony about their sad association which was still perceptible across the long years that lay between.

He read on; but there was little more. The concluding portion of the report made mention of the hiring of a boat, and related how a herring smack passing Chair Ladder warned two men fishing from a boat of their dangerous proximity to that dreaded rock. That was the last seen of them. Two days afterwards their empty boat was found smashed on the rocks by Tol-ped, and later one battered corpse was washed ashore. The report ended with the decision of the jury. Harry observed that the words “an open verdict” were heavily underlined, and that to the evidence of Esther Fenton a pencilled note of exclamation had been affixed at the end.

Thoughtfully he tied the papers together again and restored them to the chest. It was with something of

an effort that he made further examination of the other contents within. Books, clothes, and parchments of ancient deeds he turned over with a doubting hand, and his eye fell upon some bottles of whiskey stored secretly away. Then he saw some more documents near the bottom of the chest. His hand was stretched forth to take them; but he refrained.

With a quick revulsion of feeling he rose and closed the lid, repelled by his own act in ransacking this musty, worm-eaten chest, almost like some grave-breaker prising booty from the mouldy jaws of Death. In his heart he did not dare to brave the revelation he might find within. He had had more than enough of such heritages of the past, and intuition told him that this secret of forbidden love, which had already come between Ailsa and himself, was best left undisturbed beneath the dark reticence of Death, to await the ghastly and involuntary candor of the Last Day. All the persons who had shared in the secret were dead; let death, then, be the climax to it still.

With this determination he was about to leave the Place of Watch, when the light he carried shone upon a crumpled paper on the floor. Thinking it had fallen from the chest, he picked it up, and saw that it was a letter which had been opened and crushed up. He smoothed it out with indifference, but as the superscription caught his eye he gave a start. For it was addressed to himself, in the clear and dainty writing of the girl he loved. With shaking hand he took the letter from its envelope, and held the light so that it fell clearly on the contents.

The letter was headed "Eastbourne," and signed "Ailsa." In it she signified her wish to see him again. "I saw you on the Eastbourne front on Monday night," she wrote. "In writing to you like this I am breaking a solemn promise made to Lady Hilmerceux before she died, but I feel I must see you once more. Will you meet me next Thursday by the dewpond in the heather on the lower downs, where we saw the magpie in the thorn-tree? I will be there at two o'clock."

In the shock of this discovery he stood dazed, staring like one confounded at the letter in his hand. Why was this letter from Ailsa, addressed to him, lying open in the Place of Watch? At first he was completely at a loss; seeking a clue to the meaning of the thing. Again he read the letter carefully through, and scrutinized the address and date. Next, prompted by a quick reflection, he examined the postmark on the torn envelope. Then the explanation of the mystery came to him in a flash. It must have been Radford who had opened the letter and kept it from him.

Why had he done this? How had he dared? Here was an act which hinted at grave things. "Why should Radford interfere with my letters?" he thought. By the light of his previous discovery he already guessed that the steward of Hilmerceux was in some dark way connected with that unrevealed mystery of the past: the secret which he had refused to probe. Who else but the steward could have left the light burning in the Place of Watch? Was it he who had stored the relics of William Fenton in the oaken chest? Those things had made no very strong impression on his mind before; they were but half-glimpsed or dimly seen—their sinister significance unguessed. But now——

Now, through the suppressed letter from Ailsa, there flashed into the eyes of Harry a more startling and dreadful light. The next instant the veil which covered his vision was rent. A darkness dispersed: in that moment he believed he saw the ghastly and incredible truth. This man had arisen from the dead. He had said so himself; but his listener had not then known what he meant. Now he did. He had arisen indeed—started up from the shadows of the past with a crazed brain; the enemy of Hilmerceux and him, with a hatred which had smouldered forty years to avenge.

His mind reeled at the conjecture. His soul sickened at the thought. Reason recoiled from it in utter incredulity, and yet he knew that it was so. This man

had stepped forth from the grave to go out that night into the fog, even as William Fenton had gone into the great fog forty years back to the rescue of the woman he loved.

The thought of the fog brought with it another and sharper fear. Ailsa had been on the downs before it fell, waiting for him. He unfolded her letter again and read it anxiously now. . . . "Meet me . . . by the dewpond in the heather on the lower downs. . . . I will be there at two o'clock. . . ." At two o'clock Ailsa had been at that remote and lonely tryst, and the fog had fallen shortly after three. If she had waited in the distant spot for him she must have been caught in the fog.

He tried to thrust the idea away, telling himself angrily that it was absurd. He asked himself what madness possessed him to suppose that Ailsa, who knew the downs so well, would allow herself to be overtaken by a fog? There could be no doubt she had seen it coming, and left the downs for shelter before it was too late. But the thought returned with force, and the realization of the sinister and uncanny coincidences of the night began to weigh upon his faculties with a deep-seated fear. And with this fear came the memory of his dream: of the girl in the fog calling him by name, and the stealthy shape following in her wake.

As these evil fancies besieged him, he still told himself mechanically, with dry lips, that Ailsa was safe. But even as he whispered the assurance, his mind was made up. He was going out into the night to look for her: to the place where she had asked him to be. Common sense told him his action was folly, but his love said imperatively, "Go!" She would not be by the dewpond now, alas; he knew that only too well. But, at least, he could seek her, and search the downs until dawn.

He made up his mind quickly. His fears for her sharpened his faculties, and he decided without hesitation what he intended to do. The big car was locked in the garage, and Willis slept in the room above. But he did

not want to waste time arousing him, or to cause speculation better left unprovoked. The small car used for the estate was left in another place unlocked. He determined to use it, and to drive himself. Having come to this decision he hurriedly left the Place of Watch.

II

The white tract from the village debouched from overhanging trees and then faded away. Harry kept the car going for awhile, though prudence warned him against the folly of attempting to drive across the open downs at night. But he swept on recklessly until almost upset by a violent bump. Then he slowed down reluctantly, and stopped the car. Dismounting, he lifted one of the lights from its socket and set out on foot. Light in hand, he took his way resolutely across the downs, with but a vague idea of the direction where the dewpond in the heather lay. But some vital instinct urged him on; walking, running, stumbling at times, in the blackness of the night. He had but one thought just then—to find the dewpond in the heather, where the thorn-tree was. He had one or two vaguely remembered landmarks in his mind; the wood on his right hand, Cissbury in the distance, and Chanctonbury far away on the left. With these to guide him, across the lonely downs he sped, though at best his course was almost an haphazard one.

But he reached the meeting-place at last, though in the same haphazard way. Chance helped him to the spot. The powerful light he carried, shining afar through the dark, cast a long, slanting beam upon a narrow stony path, which he instantly knew for the one by which Ailsa had taken him to the dewpond that afternoon eighteen months before. Quickly he made his way along it, guided by the light. The path led him downward to the dewpond, gleaming from the heather; black, motionless, profoundly still.

In the silence he stood regarding it. He did not know

what he had expected to find there, but no living thing stirred beside the dark pool, sunk in the heather around its brink. No living thing? A bird in the thorn-bush awoke at the sight of him with a startled cry, and flapped off swiftly on fear-laden wings.

He turned away, alone with his anxiety and fears. He had not expected to find her there, and, yet, he was glad he had come. As he walked back along the narrow path the light shone upon the darkness around him, and lit up the vague outlines of the downs. And then it fell upon a white object lying in the path ahead. His heart gave a bound as he picked up a small handkerchief.

Ailsa had been there; so much was certain. Still, the finding of her handkerchief did not help him very much. On the other hand, its mere presence in his hand seemed to comfort him in some subtle way, as if she had left it there to reassure him and to bid him still to love and to hope. It seemed even to offer him some assurance of her safety too. After all, it was not so very far distant from that spot to the cottage where she used to live. At that moment she might be sheltering there. The possibility made him feel almost cheerful again. He decided to return by way of the cottage and inquire.

But when the cottage rose from the darkness at last, he did not feel so sure. As he lifted the latch of the garden gate some instinct warned him that Ailsa had not sought refuge there. He saw himself trying to explain his quest to some rustic lout, staring at him with sleepy eyes, scratching a stupid Sussex head. He would search for Ailsa all night, but not in this way. "Of what use?" he thought bitterly. His hand fell off the gate, and he turned away.

Slowly he made his way back to the place where he had left his car, pondering what best to do. Topping the ridge beyond the cottage he looked across the downs on his right. As he did so he uttered an astonished cry. For the second time that night he saw an unexpected light.

There it was, burning faintly in the distance, far below.

His heart leapt within him at the sight of it. He was standing on the high rise from where he had looked down on Mouldering House that day when he and Ailsa rode back to Hilmerceux from the wood. And this night the light came from the same deep secret glen: from Mouldering House itself. What was it doing there? Some instinct, infallible as truth itself, told him to seek Ailsa there.

Terror awoke within him. Fear for her safety—for her life—moved him now. Instantly he took his bearings of the light, like a seaman, by the shadowy outline of Chancetonbury Ring; for he remembered that he could not see into the glen except from the summit of the hill. And then he set out for it. The distant light soon vanished from view, but the one he carried threw a gleaming circle before him which helped to guide his way. He walked fast: nothing living in him now but love and fear.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DRY BONES LIVE

I

A light shone from the darkness outside, and steps sounded heavily in the passage, coming near. Trembling with fear, Ailsa waited, not knowing what to expect. The next instant the figure of a man appeared in the inner doorway, and looked at her by the lantern he carried in his hand. It was the steward of Hilmerceux.

In relief at the unexpected sight of him, joy broke from her lips in an hysterical cry. Her first thought was that Harry knew she had been lost on the downs in the fog, and had sent the steward in the direction of Mouldering House to seek her there.

She tried to speak, but something in his demeanor repelled her and held her dumb. Without doubt it was the steward, but his deep-set and piercing eyes fixed themselves upon her in the strangest way. And he was dressed as she never had seen him before; in a long cloak wrapped about him, with a shepherd's crook in his left hand. Holding the light before him, he stood there regarding her with a fixed gaze.

"Is it you, Esther?" he said, and it was not Radford's voice that spoke.

Her face changed as she looked at him. She had risen from the settle when he entered, but she now shrank a little away.

"My name is not Esther," she said, wide-eyed; "I am Ailsa Rose."

He seemed to take in these words with an effort, like a man suddenly aroused from deep sleep. Somberly he continued to gaze at her by the ray of his lantern, though now with a doubting, almost stupefied air.

"You are Esther," he retorted harshly. He moved a step nearer, then started back. "No, no!" he said passionately, and with pain in his tone. "You are not Esther. Esther is dead and buried; and she was old—old . . . riper for death than love. Ay . . . dead. I had forgotten. She should have died forty years before. It might have been best; yes, it might have been best."

Ailsa heard him with dismay. It was terrible: not his words, charged with some shadowy meaning she did not comprehend, but the expression upon his face. He was like a man who heard voices and saw faces invisible to her, and his narrowed gaze met hers and went beyond it, as if she had not been there at all—like eyes trying to pierce the impenetrable darkness of the unseen. This phase passed, and she perceived that a terrible struggle was taking place in his mind, as if he were in the grip of some dire belief from which he sought desperately to escape. He grew calmer by degrees, and came closer, looking at her again with the concentrated intensity of one seeking to steady his faculties by sheer effort of will.

"Yes," he said, and the quietude of his tone now helped to reassure the frightened girl. He went on, very distinctly: "I know you now. You are Ailsa Rose. This fog has driven me beside myself. I thought I was back in the fog forty years ago, looking for my poor Esther with my dog Hironnelle. When I saw you from the window crouching within I thought you were Esther. Ailsa Rose! God help you, lass, but you're following close in the footsteps of her who's gone—to the night, and the hour, and the place where I found her. And a Hilmerceux has beguiled you too! Weak and wanton, you could not keep your promise to the dead, and stay away from him. Why are you here?"

"I was lost in the fog," she murmured.

"Then I thank God for sending the fog this night," he cried. "For by His hand I was sent abroad in it, and led here to save you from shame. Is the hellish wrong the other one wrought to live on like a burning fire, con-

suming and burning still, forty years after he is dead? I thought I had been punished enough. I kept your letters to him, and prayed for your delivery from this wicked house. To-night my prayers have been answered. I have been sent here to-night to save you from your brazen ways. 'It is God's sign that he has forgiven me for the past.'

"What do you mean?" she whispered fearfully; and then, with a clearer tone: "Why did you dare to open a letter of mine? I have never harmed you. It was a shameful thing to do. You had no right—no right—" Speech forsook her, and she ended with a sob.

"I have more right than you think; yes, more right," he repeated, an odd note in his voice.

"What right?" she said faintly.

"Can you not guess?"

"No," she whispered again, but this time fear knocked at her heart.

"I am your grandfather—William Fenton."

She swayed a little, and looked like one dazed.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried distractedly. "How can you say so? My grandfather is dead—drowned forty years ago, and buried at Tullington churchyard. It is on the tombstone that he—that he—" Her voice broke off on the word.

He seemed to understand. The shadow of some inscrutable and saturnine expression hovered and vanished on his lips.

"Ay, I know of that inscription," he said. "Many a time have I passed through the churchyard to read the words, and wondered what my Lady Hilmerceux would do if she knew whose bones lay there beneath. But lass, it is true what I have told you—I say it before God." He lifted his head and went on solemnly: "I am William Fenton, brought back to life after forty years. Because of this fog to-night the dry bones live."

Her eyes never left his face—terrified, inquiring, beseeching. He bore her profound scrutiny unmoved. Understanding came to her in a flash.

"Was it you that burnt a light here the night grandmother died?" she asked in a low tone.

"Yes," he said quietly, "though I did not know that Mouldering House was overlooked by any part of the downs except Chanctonbury Ring. Had I known, the light would not have been burning for you to see." He hesitated an instant, then went on: "I was mad and reckless with liquor that night, and passed by the cottage on my way home. Your grandmother knew my footsteps from her room. She came downstairs, and although she could not see me in the darkness she stood in the open doorway calling my name. Some intuition had come to her—some strange sense which is given to people about to die. I have seen it before. It is like a light struck in the darkness before everything goes black."

Ailsa shuddered, and turned paler, then found herself swaying again. But this time everything faded away. It was the last and overpowering shock of that terrible night. When she open her eyes again a few moments later she was back on the oak settle where she had slept, with the steward bending over her, a flask in his hand. He was holding the cup of the flask to her lips, and she swallowed the brandy obediently, like a child. It was then she became aware that he had taken off his shepherd's cloak, and wrapped it about her.

"Are you better now?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered mechanically.

"I have other things to say to you," he went on. "I want you to know all this night. Are you able to listen?"

"Yes," she said wearily.

"Then I will tell you," he said, "for it must be told now."

II

His voice seemed to reach her from a distance as she leaned back with an air of lassitude in her pose, wrapped warm in his cloak, her head drooped against the black

of the wooden settle on which she sat. The words penetrated her consciousness faintly at first, as though she was in a dream, listening to a voice far away. From between half-closed lids her eyes saw the speaker vaguely, in a kind of mist, standing beside the settle, and looking, not at her, but into the shadowy darkness of the room beyond, as if at something visible there to his vision alone.

Her dull fatigue passed from her little by little as the significance of the story he had to tell reached her brain, though at that moment he seemed not to care if she were listening or not. For, once the reserve of his long silence were shattered, he appeared—for a time at least—to lose sight of her presence there altogether, and to be pleading his case in agony before some high, invisible tribunal of justice. The lantern he put down on the settle beside the girl, and in its yellow rays she discerned the changing outline of his stern face illumined against a dark background. It was the expression of his face which in the beginning did more to overcome her weakness and fatigue than his words. She saw remorse and fear there, but it was the anguish upon it which moved her most: a misery of despair which stripped him of all his strength and left him at this moment with the look of a man who had nothing more to go through except the bitterness of death.

Again he told her he was William Fenton, who forty years before, had found the girl he was to marry sheltering in Mouldering House after being caught in a fog like the one which had descended upon the downs that night. And when his lantern's rays first showed him Ailsa crouching there, the delusion which had come upon him at Hilmerceux grew stronger than before, carrying him backward through the years to the unstained atmosphere of the past. At that moment he thought she was Esther, in sober truth, lying unconscious as he had found her then; her fair hair loosened and hanging about her face.

As he spoke of it now it did not seem such an impossible thing. Almost unconsciously he revealed to Ailsa that his love for Esther was of the kind which few men have

it in them to bestow, and throughout his forty years of isolation and complete effacement her image remained steadfast in his mind, but always as the fair-haired girl he had carried in that pale dawn from Mouldering House. That was strange—or was it less strange than it seemed?—because the blow which stabbed his happiness to death was inflicted upon him then. He had no suspicion until that moment; no, not one! To him her face was pure and spotless, and her eyes innocent as a child's. It was not until after this night of fog, when she was lost while trying to make her way by the bridle-path from Wiston to Tullington across the Ring, that the truth was unwittingly—though by her own mouth—laid bare. For when he bent over her in the darkness of Mouldering House she had opened eyes which seemed dazzled at the sight of him, and had cried out—not his name—but, “Harry, Harry!” as she lifted outstretched arms about his neck. He had started back, enlightened in a flash, but she had clung to him sobbing, quite unconscious of the name she had uttered in that first moment of hysterical relief. And later, as he carried her with infinite care up the hill from that sinister place, she had—half-deliriously and unconsciously still—revealed to him much more than she ever knew.

In telling this story now he did not make it clear whether he said anything to Esther of this involuntary confession afterwards, or at any later time. He hurried over that part in the fewest words; briefly, haltingly, like a man divulging an experience almost too sad and painful to be told. In that moment he seemed to live again through the agony of that unpremeditated disclosure in which he first discovered the secret perfidy of the two he so dearly loved.

The emotion of his voice moved Ailsa as she listened, and she put a faltering hand towards him standing there. But if he saw that compassionate gesture it passed unregarded, and her hand dropped slowly back to her side.

Notwithstanding the revelation made in hysterical light-headedness, he soon after married the girl whom he

carried in his arms that morning up the steep hill-side from Mouldering House. Of his brief married life with her he had nothing to say, and was equally silent about the daughter that, some months later, his wife brought into the world. That seemed to be another phase of his life of which he had little desire to speak.

A change came over his face as he went on to tell of the fishing trip to Cornwall. Since boyhood he had been accustomed to accompany Harry Hilmerceux upon such sporting expeditions in the capacity of companion and body-servant, and on this occasion he went with him in the same way. His own attitude towards Harry Hilmerceux at that time remained obscure—again because of the marked reticence with which he related the whole of this portion of his tale. He seemed up to that moment never to have said anything to his foster-brother about finding out that he had dishonored the woman he loved. It may be that he felt powerless to reduce the wrong he had suffered at his hands; and, having married Esther, thought it best to allow the secret of that unknown confession to remain locked in his breast for all time. Or it is possible that he brooded over his wrong in silence, waiting—as only a man like he could wait—for a fitting opportunity of revenge. He appeared to have had a rare capacity for self-repression even then, and now, after forty years, he dwelt within an invincible barrier of silence which he was powerless—and perhaps did not desire—wholly to break down.

The occurrence which was to affect the future so deeply was brought about in the first place by a prank on Harry Hilmerceux's part. He and his companion were out fishing one day off a rocky part of the Cornish coast, when they came across a curious isolated rock towering from the sea with a cave or hole half-way up its side. When Harry Hilmerceux saw it he was seized with the impulse to scale the rock and explore the hole. Fenton thought the feat too difficult to accomplish, but Hilmerceux said the climb was easy enough, though not in the new suit he was wearing at the time. At his suggestion he and his

companion—who were very much of a height and build—changed clothes, as they had often done before. Attired in the looser garments of his companion, Harry Hilmerceux then essayed the task of climbing the wet and slippery rock.

In the little boat at the base, Fenton sat motionless, waiting for him to return. Half-way up the climber waved to his companion below. Then he continued agilely on his upward way, reached the hole, and disappeared within.

It was then temptation assailed the watcher below. Perhaps the changed clothes first put the thought into his mind, or the partial glimpse he caught of the small portrait transferred with other things to the pocket of the blue jacket he had worn. However that may have been, he was quite certain the devil came and whispered to him in the rocking boat just then, as he sat there in the solitude of the sea, waiting for Harry Hilmerceux to descend.

He spoke of the devil as a living malevolent force, as he seemed to have believed it to be in his own unhappy life. The devil had made a wanton of his sweetheart, and prompted the man he loved to debase her for his own wicked ends. That, at least, was the way he looked upon these things. He revolved them in his mind that day, sitting alone in the boat. To his way of thinking the devil seized that moment to balance the scale, sending Harry Hilmerceux to climb the rock so as to offer the man he had wronged an opportunity of revenge. And what a revenge! A vengeance of such subtle and devilish refinement of cruelty and horror that no merely human brain could have devised it of itself.

From the base of the rock he looked around him, but he could not discern a boat or sail upon that level expanse of Atlantic blue. He was appalled at the ease and security with which the deed could be accomplished. There was nothing to do but take up the oars and row away, leaving the man above on the rock.

He appeared to have acted upon the prompting of this

sudden temptation impulsively, without reflection or a second thought. That was to come later. Almost before he realized what he was doing he had obeyed. Picking up an oar, he pushed the boat off from the rock, then settled down in his seat to row steadily away from the vicinity of the spot. He rowed swiftly and without a backward glance, pulling savagely till the sweat poured off him, in his furious desire to get beyond sight and hearing of that desolate ocean rock. Once he thought a faint cry reached him across the stillness, but he did not look round. When at last, utterly exhausted, he dared survey the level surface of the water, the rock where he had left Harry Hilmerceux was no longer in sight.

A feeling of profound relief possessed him—at first. But after a while he became the prey of apprehensions and fears. His first pangs of remorse of what he now felt to be a hellish act were also tinged with the knowledge that it was one which might carry considerable risk to himself. He reflected that the rock was but a few miles distant from the Cornish coast, and perhaps upon the passage way of ships. Or it might be within the purlieu of the herring-fishing grounds, where some passing fisher-smack would sooner or later descry a human figure gesticulating in mid-air at the dark mouth of that strange cave. Perhaps he would be salved from the rock only to die. In that event William Fenton had no delusions of the nature of his crime, nor of the punishment which would be legally exacted for it when the offender was brought to book. His heart misgave him at that thought.

Whether he had any notion of attempting at these promptings to find the rock again he did not say. Any belated thought he may have had of doing so was put out of his head by his own unexpected plight. In his exertions and excitement he had drifted without realizing it close to a lonely and dangerous part of the coast, a line of dark and overhanging cliffs, upon which the sea broke in a shattering sound with a great swirl of foam.

Seizing the oars he tried to row out of danger, but the boat swirled about in the breakers, and continued, stern foremost, to drift in. He essayed to hoist a small sail the boat carried, but the weather had changed, and a gust of wind carried it away. The next instant he lost one of his oars, and was in desperate straits indeed. He was a countryman, unversed in such predicaments of the sea. The man he had left on the rock was expert in the handling of boats, but William Fenton could only glance helplessly about him as his boat drifted closer and closer to the line of dark cliffs upon which the sea was breaking with an echoing and menacing roar.

As he whirled blindly towards destruction a little cove was revealed as if by magic in a rift of the great cliffs which frowned above his head. Without a moment's hesitation he sprang into the water and struck out for the shore. Although he had small skill of swimming, he managed to make the rocky beach. A few minutes afterwards he saw his boat dashed against one of the cliffs, and float, half-filled, helplessly away.

Later he found shelter in a lonely wayside inn along the coast, a sudden shower of rain plausibly accounting for his wet clothes. But the crone who kept the place was incurious and deaf, and she had no inquisitive patrons there. He stayed at the inn that night. A great storm held him weatherbound, and through the hours of darkness he cowered in his bed, listening with quaking heart to the roar of the surf upon the cliffs; wondering how it fared with the man he had left in that awful cave.

Next day the storm cleared, and the sun shone forth again. He walked across the cliffs to St. Ives, in a kind of dreadful perplexity what to do.

His problem was solved for him some days later by the sea casting up a disfigured body at Nanjizel Bay. He heard some fishermen talking in a taproom of the event. Later, he heard that the dead man had been identified as William Fenton, and he read the account of the inquest in a local paper which he bought.

There was bitter irony in the knowledge that the girl he had shielded from her own sin had unwittingly repaid the debt by claiming as her dead husband one who had indeed often held her in his arms. She had identified the torn clothes which clung to the battered, unrecognizable corpse. The jury accepted her testimony as implicitly as it was given, and the destroyer of Harry Hilmerceux was safe.

The steward broke off abruptly at this stage of his narration and gave a harsh and bitter laugh, which rang strangely through the dark and silent place. Ailsa's eyes met his pityingly, but she did not speak. After a pause he went on:

"By the law of England I was saved from the consequence of my own wicked act. The law declared William Fenton dead, and who was to resurrect him? I thought that was the end of my punishment. But it was only the beginning."

III

With this outburst of feeling he turned to his restrained manner of speech, like one in whom curb of self-repression has by long usage become second nature. The next phase of his story covered the years of his absence from England. He changed his name to Robert Radford and went abroad; to Canada in the first place, and then farther afield.

During the years of his wanderings he gained a wide experience and capacity for affairs which only travel and a knowledge of the world will bestow. When he left England it was without intention to return; but youth, strong in itself, has little understanding of those obscure impulses and emotions which in the long run sway the human heart. As the years elapsed and "Robert Radford" grew older, two widely different feelings worked within him to call him back to his own land. The first of these was remorse; the other a passionate longing to return to his native downs. The remorse he felt for his undis-

covered act was an agonizing and poignant distress which accompanied him on his roving and destroyed his peace wherever he went. The feeling grew worse as time went on. He had been brought up "religious," and the puritan in him was tortured incessantly by the deadly fear that not in this world or the next could he hope to obtain pardon for what he had done. Vainly he supplicated Heaven for comfort and pardon in his lonely and somber life. God refused to vouchsafe him a sign; and at length he became persuaded that eternal damnation was to be his lot unless he could win forgiveness and grace by some signal act of reparation for his crime.

His longing to return to England was of later growth, but as he grew older it became the more overmastering of the two. He came of Sussex stock, which of all English counties is least given to roam. The green and gray tints of Sussex became a potent magnet to his soul. To feel the wind of the downs on his cheeks; to see the trees nodding on Chanctonbury Ring—nostalgia of the wide green place of his birth tugged at his heartstrings more and more. At last he could resist it no longer. He determined to return, at the cost of whatever risk there might be. And, having so decided, he caught the first ship home.

In truth, he ran no risk at all. His face had altered with the passage of time; his hair had gone prematurely gray. But his altered appearance was of little moment one way or the other beside the great outstanding fact. In the eyes of all people he was dead. That was his unfailing safeguard and shield. How invincible it was he was to discover later on.

So he came back to Sussex and the downs; furtively in the beginning, then openly, and in the light of day, when he found that people who had known him as a boy had forgotten him as if he had never lived. That knowledge might have wounded a vainer man. It brought to William Fenton a sensation of unutterable relief.

The gossip of the country-side made him acquainted

with the increasing embarrassments of the great house he had formerly served. It was known that the late lord had left an impoverished estate, and it was asserted by folk who thought they knew that his widow had dipped rather deeply into her private fortune to pay the debts of her husband's brother, Harry Hilmerceux, who was drowned. And rumor, for once, spoke truth. This talk reached the ears of the returned exile, and sank deep into his soul. It came to him, as a light from heaven, that here was his way to grace; to make amends by devoting his life in some way to the house of the man whom he had left upon a Cornish rock to die.

The incredible opportunity came. An under-steward for Hilmerceux was wanted. He applied for it with credentials of estate management gained in Canada, and was given the vacant post. And although the venture required great hardihood in the outset, he soon felt assured that there was no danger of discovery at all. Who was to see, in the grave and middle-aged under-steward, Harry Hilmerceux's humble boyish companion of twenty years before? Was he not drowned, and did not a tombstone erected by Lady Hilmerceux above his remains in Tullington Churchyard attest the fact? Sometimes, when he read that grateful inscription the steward wondered if the simple rustic soul whom the stone commemorated was not in verity dead. The man who stood lonely in his place had traveled far and gained sad wisdom which William Fenton had never known.

He feared the ordeal of meeting Lady Hilmerceux, but without cause. Indeed, it would have been wonderful had she known him again. In the old days she had seen little of him, and she, too, was changed with the years. And as a girl she was naturally not interested in him. Now, twenty years later, as mistress of Hilmerceux, she was not interested in Robert Radford, her under-steward—at first.

“I was merely the new under-steward, a different order of being to herself. I thought, as she glanced indifferently

at me that first day, how she would have recoiled from her new man of business if she had known that her husband's brother was buried among common folk in Tullington Churchyard in my name, instead of lying in the seclusion of the great family vault. It is said that death levels all things, but it did not with her."

That was his thought in the beginning, before he knew of her secret love. That was to come years later, when he was living in the house. On one occasion she took him up to the picture gallery, to have his advice about the removal of some pictures to another room. It was then he first saw the dead man's portrait, and was startled by his unexpected confrontation with the vividly pictured face. That start might have almost betrayed him, if her eyes had not been fixed upon the dead man's face as well. For a moment she gazed as if she had been alone, and in that brief space her look was like a confession and revelation of the secret love of her heart. He, with his hidden knowledge of the past, divined it at the time. Afterwards he knew.

"She was beautiful, and in his own class, and she loved him from the beginning—ever since she was a girl. She would have done anything in the wide world for him, in spite of that foolish marriage of his as a boy. I have often wondered since why he did not keep with her, and let Esther be, who had nothing beside her pretty looks. Forbidden fruit, I suppose. . . . Ay, he was a true Hilmerceux there."

Ailsa, looking up at him, moved slightly on the settle, but did not speak. He was silent for a while, then sighed, and went on.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SAND RUNS OUT

I

He passed over the first years at Hilmerceux quickly. There was little to speak of beyond Lady Hilmerceux's growing trust in one who was devoting his life with single purpose to the betterment of the estate. Mr. Lemartine was inspired with confidence in Robert Radford as well, and in due course he became steward, with the management of things increasingly in his hands. It was Lady Hilmerceux who later suggested that he should live in the house; for his own comfort, and to have him nearer to her in the struggle they were mutually engaged upon for the restoration of prosperity to the place. Her concern for the future was the deep abiding passion of her solitary life. Even after her sons were lost in the war she triumphed over grief and pursued her aim, as if with the eye of faith discerning the coming of the ultimate heir. Perhaps she doubted whether God would let the family of Hilmerceux become extinct.

"But it seemed then to be God's will that this family should die out," he said, looking down on the girl as he uttered these words.

Ailsa shuddered at that somber thought. She knew what his words implied.

The steward continued his story, tracing the dim outline of those distant years. Looking back at that portion of his life, he let Ailsa understand that he took good care not to risk an encounter with his wife then; or, indeed, at any subsequent time. Though he did not say so, some instinct probably warned him that Esther was little likely to be mistaken in his identity again. Whether that was so or not,

he did not dare to face her, and he had no difficulty in keeping out of her way. He was the steward of Hilmerceux, engrossed with the concerns of a great estate; she was William Fenton's widow, living in a small cottage on remote downs, and rarely stirring abroad. Their ways of life were as completely asunder as if they were still separated by half the expanse of the globe. In such circumstances it was small wonder that they never met.

No one had ever suspected him from first to last. His unwearying devotion in serving Hilmerceux was accepted by the mistress of Hilmerceux as service which any man should be proud to render in such a cause. Although now set securely in a position of responsibility and trust, he was never, through those quiet years, completely and wholly at ease. By nature taciturn, he concealed his fears and anxieties behind a cold aloofness and reserve. In such guise he confronted the world, outwardly stern and calm.

Indeed, he had little outward cause for alarm, with his secret buried and forgotten in William Fenton's grave. But he had a deadly enemy nevertheless; one which lurked and watched and waited within him. During the period of his solitary wanderings he had fallen in slavery to drink, and he was unable to throw off the failing entirely in his new and altered life. A disregarded weakness earlier, in his new career it was of much more serious import, and one charged with considerable danger to himself. No man can change himself completely, as the man called Robert Radford had long ago found. When his secret craving overcame him Robert Radford vanished, and William Fenton emerged from the grave to resume possession of the flesh.

Between each lapse he viewed his secret indulgence with horror, knowing full well how it menaced his safety and security there. Repentant and recovered, he would pray with streaming eyes to be saved from falling again. For he cherished the growing power of his position at Hilmerceux, and the respect and dignity it brought him

as time went on. So he set himself to conquer his besetting folly, and in the renewed tranquillity of a long period of abstinence would flatter himself that the sin was exorcized at last. Then, in a moment of weakness, it would break loose and overthrow him again. The dignified and busy steward would vanish, and William Fenton, haunted by specters, would pass the night secretly drinking in his office chair.

Fearing that he might sooner or later betray himself in the unbridled moments of his vice, he at length hit on the idea of taking himself at such times to a secluded spot on the downs where his besotted folly might in safety have its vent. The thought came to him one day while he was examining Mouldering House, which belonged to the Hilmerceux estate. He was aware how the sinister place was shunned by the countryside, and as the keys were in his possession he was able to go and come as he pleased. There, safe from scrutiny or the chance of surprise, the outburst might run its secret course until repentance and the next period of abstinence returned.

Thereafter, when the premonitory throes and cravings of a bout came on, he would go over the downs to Mouldering House until it passed away. And the specters he saw at such times went with him thither, to keep company with him there. In the dark solitude of the place three people sat through the silence of the night, but only one was alive—William Fenton, deep in his cups. The others were Harry Hilmerceux and Esther; not the gray-haired Esther of the cottage, but the fair haired, sweet-faced girl.

II

So the years fell away. He began to grow old, but in compensation he had gained a measure of peace. His fears had vanished; his recurring excesses grew fewer and more easily controlled, and he saw the day not far distant when

he should be entirely free. A notable figure in the countryside, he was widely respected as one who, by wise and prudent stewardship, had partly salved a great estate from the folly of the past. He enjoyed the approval of conscience, and the complete trust and regard of the mistress of Hilmerceux and her legal man of affairs. The plaudits of conscience became at length a natural thing, and he felt with a certain complacency that Heaven had accepted in full reparation for his crime the stern labor and effort of twenty years. That was the moment chosen by God (he said) for the beginning of his punishment upon earth.

The first of the signs by which he interpreted that decree was the appearance of Ailsa at Hilmerceux. At first he did not regard it in that light, though it gave him a shock to gaze upon her in that house, a living, palpitating likeness of his Esther of forty years before. As he grew accustomed to her presence there, he seemed to see in her innocent happiness some inscrutably bestowed measure of compensation for his great unhappiness through this house in the past. Although he could not reveal himself to her, it was in his power, as steward, to minister to her pleasure and enjoyment there. An added happiness swelled within his heart at that thought. It soothed him to think that he could do so much for Esther's descendant unknown. The feeling grew upon him that he was watching over another Esther: Esther as he had known her at the beginning.

That frame of mind lasted with him until the coming of the heir.

His voice changed now as he recalled his first sensations at the sight of him, when he was brought into his office at Hilmerceux that bright spring morning eighteen months ago. Fear fell upon his soul as he looked at him, and for a dreadful moment he believed it was Harry Hilmerceux, back debonair and unchanged from his ocean cave in the middle of the sea. In a start of utter horror he almost betrayed himself, but it was no time for weakness then. The self-repression of his solitary years saved him. He sat

still, struggling for calmness as he listened to his story, until Lady Hilmerceux swept in upon them, and cried aloud his own first secret thought.

He was reassured when he knew everything, but not for long. That night he witnessed, by chance and unseen, the first meeting between Ailsa and the heir. Passing along the gallery he saw a light in the picture room, and looked within. From the darkness he saw them standing side by side before the picture of the man he had cast away. Their faces were as those of the two he had known in the distant past. A profound intuition—a premonition—of the future came to him as he watched.

“He had come there for his inheritance, but I knew there were more heritages than one. There was an inheritance of shame.”

He uttered the last word loudly, as if conveying a warning by mere volume of sound. Ailsa looked up at him quickly, but again she did not speak. He hurried on, speaking more quickly now.

So it befell that he had observed them and watched the unfolding of their love. Condemned to silence, he suffered torture until he grew haunted by the sad illusion that he was plunged back in a repetition of the past. Every trick of Ailsa’s voice and gesture, every glance she gave the heir, were as cruel weapons for the tearing open of a wound he had been fain to think quite healed. And in his torture the slumbering demon of his vice began to stir within him again. He resisted, but it seemed to detect the moral weakening of his fibre, and raged for liberty more fiercely still. The moment was at hand when it was once more to be set free.

“It was after I saw him going to the corridor of the east wing,” he abruptly said.

Ailsa did not look at him. Her face was enigmatic as she sat there, perfectly still. He spoke of other meetings witnessed quite accidentally by him. He had seen them together in the park walking like lovers by the Queen’s Tree, and later in the solitude of the wood. Business

of the estate had taken him to that part of the downs, and he saw them emerge from the wood and mount their horses and ride away. He feared for her then, and that night——

“I went into the corridor. . . . I was just afraid,” Ailsa murmured beneath her breath.

“I did not think of blaming you,” he said in a vibrating voice. “I thought only of the best way to save you from him.”

He wrestled with the problem through the night. In the morning his duty seemed clear. He sought Lady Hilmerceux and gave her a plain hint. His word was brief and vague, for he felt doubtful of her, but something of the bitterness of his heart must have escaped. And for all his care she stopped him at once, walking away from him with a changed face. The one look she gave him told him plainly that he had gone too far. Her pride of race was affronted that her hired steward should have dared to speak to her so. She was deeply offended, and he knew it was in her haughty temper to turn him away from Hilmerceux for his breach.

That night his familiar evil broke loose in fury, and he sat drinking deeply in his room. He knew his position as steward to be forfeit, and his opportunity of watching over Ailsa’s life cast away. Sinister images of her fate came before him, and with the knowledge of his utter helplessness to avert it his wrath against the house of Hilmerceux blazed up afresh. In a trice the years wheeled backward. His second self—that Robert Radford painstakingly and anxiously made—dropped from him like a slipped-off garment, and William Fenton, a man of elemental passions, arose in his place. His burning hatred could only be slaked by revenge, as it had been slaked forty years before. In his fury and madness he determined to go to Lady Hilmerceux’s room, and reveal himself to her.

“It was late—after midnight—when I came to this decision,” the steward went on. “The house was in profound darkness, and plunged in sleep. But when I

reached upstairs I saw a light shining from beneath the door of her room.

"I went along quickly and knocked: not gently, but loudly, like one with a right to go in. In response I heard her clear, rich voice ask without a quiver who was there? I opened the door quickly, and entered the room.

"She lifted herself up upon her elbow when she saw me, and looked at me steadily with her large dark eyes. There was not the faintest shadow of fear in that look. She was always a woman of great courage, and even at that moment I respected her for it. 'What has brought you here?' she asked, and at first I could not get out the words. She looked at me with an attentive eye, as if she understood. 'You have been drinking,' she went on in the same quiet tone, 'you had better leave my room at once.' At the contempt in her voice I found my tongue. 'Ay,' I said, 'I have been drinking, but that doesn't affect what I have come here to say. I have made up my mind; I have borne things too long—' 'Stop,' she cried, 'do you still dare? This is intolerable—this outrage. You leave Hilmerceux in the morning, Robert Radford.' Her hand went towards the bell at the bedside as she spoke. 'Not Robert Radford,' said I, 'but William Fenton.'

"Her hand dropped back to her side, as though struck away from the bell, and she stared at me with eyes which seemed to grow larger as she looked. 'Oh,' she cried softly, in a dreadful kind of voice, 'what is it you mean?'

"I told her everything then. At first I thought she did not understand. She just lay there, her hands clutching the bedclothes, staring up at me with frightened eyes, like a child's. But when I had finished she sat suddenly upright, her face stricken white and old. She stretched out one hand, shaking as if with palsy, towards me, and the other went to her heart. 'The horror of it,' she whispered, as if to herself . . . 'the horror.' Just those words, and nothing more, followed by a thin eerie scream, such as a ghost might give. The room was full of ghosts at that moment, jostling around us noiselessly, trying to

get close; a ring of transparent white faces, watching us both.

“And then, while she looked up at me, her face turned gray. She collapsed suddenly, falling back on her pillow, and I knew she was dead.

The shock of that tragic event restored me to myself or to that other self I had habited for nearly forty years. Robert Radford was indeed my only refuge now. As my madness vanished I was possessed of the deadliest fear lest I should be discovered there. But the qualities I had sedulously acquired stood me in good stead; at that moment the discretion and sober judgment of Robert Radford came to my aid. The first terrified impulse of William Fenton was to alarm the house; but the colder business caution of Robert Radford warned me that to do so would be to destroy myself. His counsel pointed out to me that it was foreordained she should die, that the secret I had guarded so long and carefully might be for ever safe. These reflections had a calming effect upon my throbbing brain. Prompted by them I went quickly and quietly from the lighted room.

“But to-night, for your sake, I have again revealed the whole of this dreadful story of the past. You have heard all, and I ask if you are going to his arms, now that you know the truth? I meant to tell him to-night, but God has guided my footsteps across the downs to you instead. Have you heard me, and understood? Danger and wickedness are lurking for you there. After what I have told you I ask you to put him out of your life and let me exult before God in your deliverance to-night.”

The surprise and horror of his revelation left Ailsa without speech. Thoughts thronged within her, but she was powerless to utter them aloud. It was in her heart to speak words of sympathy to him, but she realized there was nothing she could say. He stood apart, like one who had forgotten her existence; a dim, mysterious figure, as lonely and remote as if he had indeed lain those long years in the grave. Her eyes lingered sadly upon his downcast

face. She felt that he was no longer of the earth, but a being who dwelt apart in some dim region of memory of his own.

"I love him so," she whispered at last, half to herself, but he caught her words.

"There is danger in such love," he sternly said. "I have been sent here to-night to save you. Think no more of him. Do not go to Hilmerceux again."

She moved her hands in a gesture of despair.

"What am I to do or say?" she cried. "Lady Hilmerceux made me promise not to see him any more, but if he loves me still—if he needs me now——"

"Take care," he said loudly, "take care! You have heard this story of the past, and you have been warned. You know now what the name of Hilmerceux means."

Her lips quivered a little as she looked again into his face.

"I am sure he is different from the others," she rejoined, in a beseeching voice.

"But he has the blood—the blood of wickedness," he muttered, with a somber air. "If you see him, you do it at the peril of your soul."

She lifted to him the clear light of her candid eyes.

"I love him better than myself," she said.

"God give you grace to decide aright!" he said solemnly. "I can say no more. You belong to their house, after all."

"Their house?" she whispered. "What do you mean?"

"You are of their blood, and not of mine," he said slowly. "You are nothing to me—nothing; though I would to God it were not so. For I have loved you—ay, from the beginning, as though my own blood, and not his, ran in your veins. And because you are so dear to me I sought you to-night in the storm."

He broke off abruptly. She glanced at him now with a shadow of indecision in her face, and in her mind were wondering thoughts called there by his last words. The

next instant she started at the sound of a quick footstep drawing near outside. She knew it was the man she loved, before she heard his voice.

"Ailsa!" he called, "Ailsa!"

She turned eagerly, a smile of happiness illumining her pale face. A moment later he entered the room, and she was in the shelter of his arms. He held her closely to him, but his eyes rested upon the figure of the steward standing there.

"Radford!" he said.

The steward gave no sign of recognition at his voice. With downcast head he walked past them through the open doorway. Ailsa's gaze followed him until he disappeared into the gloom.

THE END.

